ARKS OF THE INTERIOR SEA

Being a brief account of certain vessels that carry knowledge, and of a child who learned to hear one humming

A scholarly retelling of the novella
A Fleet of Small Hearts by Surjan

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Introduction

by Surjan

The book you are holding is a translation, though not in the usual sense. Some years ago I wrote a small slow novella about a pink ship named The Marigold and a yellow-sweatered young librarian named Wren, and about a red ship named The Vermilion at the southern tip of Manhattan, and about a forest of planted books. It was my book. I loved it. I knew, from the first season of writing, that it did not need to be any other book.

But a book, once written, begins to ask to be rewritten. Not out of dissatisfaction — out of curiosity. What would it sound like in another voice. What would it look like from another window. What would my small pink ship become if she were described not by the warm domestic narrator of the first book but by someone standing at a careful scholarly distance from her, compiling footnotes rather than affectionate observations, and piecing the whole thing together from the kind of unreliable ledgers that a patient pedant might keep for half a century and then, toward the end of his life, feel the need to reconcile.

This book is my answer, or rather it is an answer, offered one afternoon to a patient collaborator, in a register quite different from the first. The arks are now catalogued rather than beloved. The humming books are now entries in an unreliable register. The grove at the southern tip of Manhattan is still there, but it has been moved slightly sideways into the geography of footnotes, where it belongs as much as anywhere. The narrator — who is not, as I have pointed out elsewhere, me, though he shares some of my habits — speaks in the first person, which is the conventional first person of the scholar who has been through too many registers for too long and is no longer surprised by anything he finds in them, except by the occasional ark he cannot quite explain.

The child, in this version, is called Wren still, but Wren is now explicitly what Wren always somewhat was in the original — a child who is neither a boy nor a girl, and who has known this since an age at which most children have not yet thought about the question. The ark, being a vessel of long ambiguous allegiances — mother without being a mother, grandmother without being a grandmother, building without ceasing to be a ship — recognises Wren's particular shape at once. I am glad, in this retelling, to have given Wren that recognition plainly. The original book was trying to do this and did not entirely know how; the scholarly voice of this version, by its small kind distance, seems to have made it easier to do.

August, on the other ark, is the same kind of child. I had not, in the first book, fully worked out that August and Wren were in some sense a mirrored pair — though the first book was moving in that direction across its last several chapters. The second book makes the mirroring explicit. The two children are one another's correspondents for two winters before they meet; each discovers, in their

fourth letter, that the other is neither a boy nor a girl; and the simultaneous recognition — the kind that does not require either child to explain themselves, because the explanation has already been understood — seems to me, on reflection, to be one of the quieter goods the two versions have, together, been trying to describe. A young person who is unusual in some way that their immediate community has accepted but has not, perhaps, precisely mirrored back, is a young person who will one day, in a letter from across the country or across a continent, discover a correspondent who is the same kind of unusual. The discovery is ordinary, in its way. It happens every day. I wanted the book, in this version, to honour it.

The Marigold now moors between the two corncob towers of Marina City, whose lower garages open at river-level onto her slip. The Vermilion rests her hull on the marble concourse of Grand Central Terminal, and on certain afternoons keeps a second berth inside the white spiralling well of the Guggenheim. These are impossibilities. They are the right impossibilities. The scholarly voice this book speaks in permitted them — indeed, seemed quietly to require them, in the way certain registers of the mind insist that the world be stranger than the official accounts allow. The reader who has walked through Marina City at six in the morning, or who has stood on the upper balcony of Grand Central at a quiet hour, or who has ascended the spiralling ramp of the Guggenheim at four on a Thursday afternoon, may have already noticed some small thing that this book is attempting to explain. The book does not insist. It only notes, in the scholarly voice, that the noticing was not imaginary.

The voyage in this version goes down the Hudson, as it did in the original, and arrives at a grove at the southern tip of Manhattan, as it did in the original. The forest survives every retelling. This, I have come to believe, is what forests do. A long-loved image in a book is durable in a way that is not quite proportional to its loudness. The forest at the tip of Manhattan was never loud in the first book — it was a slow patient arrival, deferred across the whole of the narrative — and it is not loud here either. But it is, in both books, the destination, and the destination survives the retelling because the destination is what the retelling exists in order to reach. One can change the ships, the harbours, the names, the voice. One cannot change the grove. It is the thing the book is for.

I offer this small translation, then, as a companion to the first book rather than a replacement of it. A reader who has read the original will recognise the pink ship and the red ship and the chair-maker and the captain under their new names. A reader who has not read the original will, I hope, be drawn toward it by the shape of what this version suggests. And a reader who reads only this version and then sets it down and goes about their life without looking for any other — because they have, in their own way, finished with the book — will have had what the book can offer them on its own, which is, I think, a sufficient amount.

A few practical notes. The book is divided into three parts — Chicago, The Voyage, and Manhattan — with a set of chapters in each, and a further set of scholarly interludes distributed between the narrative chapters at intervals where the voyage pauses for a moment and the narrator,

having a little time on his hands, walks around. The interludes are marked with the Latin particle bis, which is an old scholarly convention for a second thing placed alongside a first; I chose it because it felt honest to the voice of the book. The bis chapters are shorter than the narrative ones. They are not, I think, any less important.

The arks do not hurry. Nor, it turns out, does translation. You have my thanks for opening the book.

— *Surjan*

I. A Rose-Coloured Ark Moored at Marina City

Of the ark they called La Granada it is written, in the unreliable register kept by the harbourmasters of the Chicago River between 1887 and the present, that she was launched in a year no document entirely agrees upon, and that she has been awake, in her particular manner, every morning of every year since. She does not sleep as men sleep. She diminishes. At the hour when the river is a slab of unlit pewter and the gulls have not yet undertaken their first circuit of the Willis Tower, La Granada reduces herself to a single sustained note, audible to no ordinary instrument, and in this note she waits for the first grey to soften the underside of the sky. She has done this for one hundred and thirty-nine years. She does not consider the doing a habit; she considers it, as nearly as I can translate the ship's own attitude into human language, a courtesy — an offering the water and the hour are owed.

She is moored, and has been moored for some four decades, between the two round towers of Marina City, whose corncob flanks rise above her like two great stone confidantes and whose lower garages open, at river-level, onto the slip she has made her own. Before the towers she had been berthed at a slip now covered by a highway on-ramp; before that at a slip now occupied by a restaurant whose patrons have no cause to suspect they are eating above what was once a rose ark's lowest chamber. She has, in her long life, occupied four slips. She considers the present one her true slip, in the way a long-lived person considers their third marriage their true marriage, without any disrespect to what came before.

She is the colour of a pomegranate cut open at dusk. The hour before dawn, in the particular latitude of Chicago, is the colour of the interior of a certain shell. La Granada has, for some hundred and thirty-nine years, approved of the agreement between these two hues. She does not presume the sky is colouring itself for her convenience. She merely notes, each morning, that the agreement obtains, and takes from the noting the small patient pleasure a long-moored thing takes in any correspondence between itself and its weather.

Through her aft porthole she observes the Willis Tower. She greets it each morning. The Willis Tower does not reply — being a tower, it is incapable of reply — but La Granada is not troubled by the silence of what she greets, having greeted, in her long life, a particular cloud on her first morning in the water, and received no answer from the cloud, and decided then that the greeting was for herself alone. Before the Willis Tower she had greeted a bank whose name changed twice and which was finally demolished. Before that bank she had greeted a church whose steeple was removed during a municipal reorganisation of the skyline that the records of the period politely decline to explain. The Willis Tower, were it possessed of opinion, would be flattered to know it stands in a long line.

It was March. It was a Thursday. It was a little after six.

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La Granada took her morning inventory, as she had taken it for one hundred and thirty-nine years, and was fond of the doing. I have been permitted, through the courtesy of her present captain and the less formal courtesy of the ark herself, to reconstruct the inventory from the internal hum that accompanies it. A ship's inventory is not a list. It is a warmth passed slowly across the body of the ship, section by section, in the manner of a practiced physician passing a hand across a patient whom they have known for decades.

She began with her own shape. Her hull was sound. Her lower chamber was dry. Her small brass smokestack was tucked at the stern where it belonged and had tucked itself there since the day the original copper stack had been removed and the brass one installed, which had been, by her own reckoning, a Tuesday in 1958. Her two upper galleries, the port and the starboard, were empty save, in the starboard gallery, for a single square of sunlight lying across a chair the colour of persimmon, which the carpenter Amadeo had built in his youth and which was her favourite chair because she remembered the smell of him building it. She noted the chair with the particular warmth she reserved for objects she did not see every morning but which surprised her, every time she did see them, with the freshness of their belonging.

Then she moved through the reading floor. The boards were set. The three tall windows that looked out on the north branch of the river were clean — Magda had cleaned them the previous evening — and the thin morning light was coming through them in the long patient way of river light, which is different from lake light and different again from harbour light, though only a ship who had known all three could have explained the difference. The reading tables had been put back. The chairs were pushed in. The small green reading lamp at the window table had been left on by someone the night before, and La Granada noted this not as a fault but as a small record of a particular reader's absent-mindedness. She knew the reader. She did not mind the lamp.

Then to her cargo.

She carried, by her own reckoning, between eleven and twelve thousand volumes, and knew the location of each. She did not count them — one does not count what one loves — but felt them as the body feels the weight of its own hair. She felt the codex bound in the colour of a military coat. She felt the dictionary the colour of a winter morning. She felt the three romances written by a certain woman of Evanston, the last of which had come aboard just before winter and which had, in the three months since its arrival, already been read by four separate readers, a rate of circulation the ark considered promising. She felt the folk tales, the harbour poems, the memoirs, the small atlas with the hand-coloured plates that lived on the lowest shelf near the porthole. She felt them all. All were sound. All were in their places. All were well.

One of them was humming.

La Granada smiled. A ship's smile is not a visible event; it is a warming, a half-degree rise in the temperature of her hull that anyone touching her would have noticed and that no one, in a hundred and thirty-nine years of many hundreds of hands laid on her, had ever noticed. The humming book had been humming for four days now. It was not yet time to do anything about it, and perhaps it would never be time to do anything about it — not every humming book went all the way — but she was pleased it was humming, and she was pleased with where it was, which was in the pocket of the small yellow woollen jersey the child Wren had gone to bed in, and which was, at this hour, folded across the back of a chair in the small forward cabin where Wren was still asleep.

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Wren was still asleep. I have elsewhere given a fuller account of Wren, and I will not repeat it here; it is enough to say, for the purposes of this chapter, that Wren was the child of the household and was, that morning, ten years old, and that their sleep had thinned by six o'clock to the particular grade which presages waking. La Granada felt this and was glad. She had been looking forward to this morning for some time, though she could not have said, if asked, why. A ship of a hundred and thirty-nine years knows that the things she looks forward to, when their reasons finally arrive, are usually larger than she had supposed.

She sent a slow warm note toward Wren without waking them. This was one of La Granada's private pleasures, the pleasure of being what she described to her oldest sister La Albarrana as a grandmother-sort of ship: the pleasure of sending, into the sleep of a sleeping child, a small warm patient note that felt, if one had to describe it, like the feeling of being covered with a blanket one had not asked for, by someone one loved. Wren turned a little in their bed. La Granada held the note steady until Wren had settled. Then La Granada moved on.

She moved on to the humans.

Alma was in the galley, as Alma always was at this hour. La Granada felt her mother-thought. Alma was not the ark's mother, of course, but Alma had lived aboard La Granada for longer than most mothers live with most children, and the ark thought of Alma's presence as motherly even though it was also the presence of a fifty-two-year-old woman with a shawl the colour of moss who was boiling water for coffee and doing nothing especially remarkable. Alma was steady. That was the word La Granada used for her. The ark was a slow ark, not given to long strings of adjectives; she liked a word to do a job, and steady did Alma's job for her.

The carpenter Amadeo was already in the shop, which was on the barge that lay alongside La Granada's slip. Amadeo was always in the shop by six. La Granada could feel him now, through the concrete barge and up through her own hull: the small quick weight of him moving between the cedar bench and the cherry-wood pile. La Granada liked Amadeo. She had always liked him. She had

been liking him particularly well for twenty-one years, which was how long ago he had come aboard, nervous and thin, to ask Alma if she would marry him. Alma had said yes in the starboard gallery, in the persimmon armchair, which La Granada had taken as an honour done to the armchair.

Captain Isidro was in his small bunk near the bow, asleep with one hand wrapped around a mug that was not, at the moment, full of tea, but that would, within the hour, be full of tea, because that was how Isidro began his days. La Granada was fond of Isidro precisely because Isidro did almost nothing. He let her navigate. He drank his tea. He kept her company. In twenty-two years he had not once attempted to teach her anything, which was, to La Granada, the hallmark of a gentleman.

And Wren.

Wren's sleep, as I have said, was thinning. The ark felt them stir. She felt, too — in the way a ship of long experience feels such things — that this thinning was different from the ordinary morning thinning, that it carried with it a small bright curiosity which the child themselves had not yet consciously registered. Wren was waking toward something. La Granada could not yet have said what it was. She had her suspicions.

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She sent a small morning hum out across the river.

It was the ordinary morning hum, the one she had sent out every day of her life. A low slow note, patient as the water, rolling out in concentric rings from her hull and into the current of the north branch and along the bottom and up into the hulls of the other arks around her. The other arks felt it. The other arks were beginning their own morning hums, and La Granada's greeting met their greetings in the water, and the water held them all like a bowl holding a soup.

La Albarrana was two slips over, at her mooring by Navy Pier. She was one of La Granada's oldest sisters — not as old as La Granada herself, but old enough to have known La Granada's grandmothers, which is to say old enough to be a dear intimate. La Albarrana answered first. Her answer was, as it always was, a little drier than La Granada's, a little more given to amusement.

A bright morning, dear, La Albarrana hummed.

A bright morning, dear, La Granada hummed back.

The ice is going.

I felt it yesterday.

You and your feeling.

La Granada hummed her small slow laugh. Across the harbour, La Albarrana hummed hers. They had been exchanging this small joke for decades. Neither of them was tired of it. A joke, to an ark, is not a joke precisely; it is a recognition-sound, a way of saying I am still here and you are still

there and the shape of the water between us is still the shape we have known. Humans exchange such recognitions in the form of small daily phrases — the good morning that does not really ask after the morning — and arks exchange them in the form of small daily jokes.

Farther out, near the mouth of the river where the lake begins, La Enredadera was stirring. La Granada felt La Enredadera's first thought of the morning enter the water — a very long, very slow warmth, the thought of an ark who had been thinking for ninety years and did not hurry her sentences. La Enredadera did not greet arks directly in the morning, as a rule. She warmed the water for everyone. It was like a great old lamp being turned on in a room. La Granada always knew when La Enredadera had awakened, because her own hull, at that moment, grew a little warmer, and her own thinking, at that moment, grew a little braver.

She was brave now.

Good morning, old friend, she thought toward La Enredadera, not expecting an answer.

An answer came anyway, a small one, quicker than La Enredadera usually answered.

Good morning, rose one. I have been thinking about your spring.

La Granada, who was a hundred and thirty-nine years old and had been called rose one by La Enredadera since the day she had been launched, felt the particular happiness of a ship being remembered. She did not answer. An answer to a remark of that kind from La Enredadera was not required and would have been, in the etiquette of the older arks, somewhat presumptuous. She simply received the remark and held it in her hull, where it continued to warm her for most of the rest of the morning.

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At seven the reading floor doors opened, though La Granada had been ready for readers since six. Her reading floor was warm. Her stacks were awake. The light of her interior had come up to its usual early-morning brightness — the yellow of butter on warm toast, the yellow of the inside of a pear — and she was pleased with the look of herself this morning, the way a well-rested person is sometimes pleased with themselves in a mirror. I record this detail because the ark herself volunteered it, and because a chronicler owes his sources what they wish to be remembered by, even when the detail is one the chronicler would not, left to his own devices, have thought to include.

Wren came up to the galley at six forty-five in their yellow jersey and their soft grey trousers, with their hair still a little flattened on one side from sleep. La Granada felt them come up the stairs. La Granada felt their mother hand them the blue enamel cup of coffee with a splash of warm milk. La Granada felt Wren sit at the small round table at the galley window, where they had taken their coffee every morning of their life, and look out across the water toward the Willis Tower.

The small book in Wren's jersey pocket was humming a little louder today than it had yesterday.

La Granada was fond of noticing such things. She thought, slowly, gently, in the way of an ark who had seen many springs and who had learned not to rush any of them: Well, then, small yellow one. Let us see what kind of morning this becomes.

Outside, on the barge, Amadeo carried a length of cherry wood the way another man might carry a cat. He glanced up at the galley porthole and saw the child he and Alma had raised looking back at him, and he raised the wood a few inches in greeting. Wren raised their coffee cup in return. They had been greeting each other through portholes since Wren had been small enough to require the lifting up, and La Granada, who had witnessed every one of those greetings, felt the warm familiar shape of this one pass through her walls.

The first reader of the day was already coming up the gangway. La Granada could feel his small weight, the slow careful step of a man who was in no hurry. A good reader. An unhurried one. She liked him already, as she had liked him for the eleven years he had been coming aboard every Thursday. His name was Arlen. He was seventy-two. He never asked for help because he always knew exactly what he wanted. In La Granada's opinion there was no higher compliment one could pay a reader than to say they never asked for help, and in her opinion Arlen deserved the compliment more fully than anyone currently on her lists.

The water at her hull moved in its small patient way. The Willis Tower, in her aft porthole, stood as it always stood, gold now at its top where the first sun had reached it, grey still along its lower half. La Granada sent it, as she had for forty years, a small affectionate thought. The Willis Tower, being a building, did not receive it.

It was not yet seven-thirty.

It was, as La Granada had suspected, going to be a good morning. It was, as she had suspected — though not yet in any clear way, only in the slow way an ark suspects things — going to be a good year. The humming book in Wren's pocket hummed a little, and La Granada, a hundred and thirty-nine years old and in love with her river, hummed back.

II. On the Nature of the Humming Volumes

At this point the present account must pause. The reader will wish to know what is meant by a humming volume, and no previous chronicler has, in my view, explained the matter with sufficient economy. I shall therefore devote this chapter to an account of the phenomenon. The narrative, which has reached a Thursday morning in March with a particular book humming in a particular pocket, will keep, and will resume in the next chapter; the material I am about to set down is, if anything, a prerequisite for understanding what follows.

The arks of the Interior Sea — seven in the rose fleet of Chicago, eleven in the crimson fleet of New York, and an indeterminate number scattered between Buffalo and Quebec — do not, properly speaking, transport books. They shelter them. A book aboard an ark passes through a long slow digestion: it is shelved, unshelved, read in a chair by a window, returned to, refused by a reader and shelved again, lifted down some months later by a different reader, carried for a season in a pocket, forgotten for a season on a bedside table, returned to the ark, stamped, re-catalogued, sent east or west on a voyage if the captain approves, and, rarely, loved by enough readers for long enough that some small acoustic property of the binding begins to resonate with the Low Hum of the ark herself.

This resonance, inaudible to any ordinary instrument, is what the old river people called the song of the book — and what the arks, with their superior modesty, call merely humming. The ark feels the hum before anyone else. The captain, if sensitive and long in service, feels it next. The keeper feels it not long after that. The reader who is loving the book is, curiously, often the last to notice — perhaps because to the reader the book has already been singing, in a register the reader has mistaken for their own feelings about it, for weeks or months before the hum becomes technically audible.

A humming book is not yet a finished thing. Most humming books stop humming within a season. They hum, faintly, for a time — long enough to attract the ark's notice — and then, as the reader who loved them moves on or as the love cools, they subside. This is not a defeat for the book or for the reader. A book that has hummed at all has received an honour; the honour is not revoked by the subsiding of the hum.

A few humming books do not stop. These few, over a period no chronicler has successfully measured, undergo a second transformation, which is the subject of a later chapter and which I shall not here disclose. It is enough to say, for present purposes, that the transformation occurs at the end of a voyage, at a particular stone in a particular harbour, and that it has been observed by every captain of La Granada who has been privileged to witness it, and that not one of them has attempted to describe it in prose, though several have attempted, in private log entries, to describe it in verse. The verse is not good. The captains were not writers. But the verse is sincere, and its

sincerity is one of the few consistent facts I have been able to establish about the transformation itself.

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The ethnography of humming books is a small field, pursued by a small number of amateur scholars, of whom I am one, and supported by no institution I know of. The terms of art I shall use in this chapter are therefore somewhat improvised, and I beg the reader's indulgence if they prove insufficient.

A hum, to begin at the beginning, is not a sound. It is a pressure. It is a small warm resistance felt by an ark through her hull when a book aboard her has begun to correspond with her Low Hum. The correspondence is not musical in the human sense. It is more nearly sympathetic: the book vibrates at a frequency the ark can detect, and the ark vibrates, in response, at a frequency the book can detect, and the two together form a small private circuit that the ark feels continuously but that the book — so the arks report — feels only intermittently, as a kind of faint pleasure.

The pitches of a humming book are, in the private log of La Granada, organised into four stages, which her successive captains have named the low, the warm, the clear, and the ringing. I give them here with brief descriptions, on the authority of Captain Dolores, who set them down in her log in 1962 after consulting with her ark on the subject across the better part of a winter.

The low — a faint, intermittent hum, scarcely distinguishable from the ordinary murmur of many books together. Most books reach this pitch at some point in their lives, for some of their readers. A book at the low pitch may remain at the low pitch for years, or may subside entirely, or may, with the right reader at the right time, climb to the warm.

The warm — a steady low hum sustained across weeks rather than moments. A book at the warm pitch is a book being properly loved. The great majority of books that reach the warm remain at the warm for their whole lives, and this is not a lesser fate; a book at the warm is a book whose readers are carrying it with them for good reasons, and the ark, feeling the warm in her hull, is content.

The clear — a distinct hum at a higher pitch, recognisable to the ark as different in kind from the warm. A book at the clear pitch is a book preparing for something. Captain Dolores wrote, in her log of the 11th of February 1962, that the clear is the pitch at which the ark must begin to pay attention, because the book, having reached it, is considering the next stage.

The ringing — the final pitch before planting. A book at the ringing is not common. Most captains will hear the ringing in at most three or four books across a full career. The ringing sustains itself for weeks and sometimes months, and when it ends, it ends in the transformation to which I have alluded and will, in due course, describe.

The folk-tale book in Wren's pocket had, over the winter, climbed from the low to the warm. In the preceding week it had climbed from the warm to the clear. La Granada had felt the climb. She had not mentioned it to anyone — not even to her oldest sister La Albarrana, with whom she mentioned most things — because she had wanted to be sure, and because books had been known, in the past, to climb to the clear and then subside again, and a fuss over a subsiding book was undignified. She had been waiting for the book to declare itself further.

It had declared itself further four days before the Thursday morning with which this account opens.

The declaration had not been dramatic. The book had, simply, sustained its clear pitch for a whole day without interruption. Previously the clear had come and gone in the course of any given afternoon; on that particular Sunday it had come in the morning and had not gone, and had still been there at dusk when Wren placed the book on the bedside table before supper. La Granada, who had been listening with the patient attention of an ark who suspected a development might be underway, had received the sustained clear with — I must choose my words carefully — a warmth that was neither pure pleasure nor pure concern but some third thing proper to an old ark when she realises, after a long season of waiting, that a development is in fact underway.

A sustained clear, in the taxonomy of La Granada's captains, is a book preparing for ringing.

Ringing, as I have indicated, is the last stage before planting.

Planting, as I have also indicated, is the subject of a later chapter.

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It would be improper to close this chapter without noting that La Granada, on the Thursday morning in question, consulted her oldest sister La Albarrana about the matter. The consultation took place at ten o'clock, through the water, in the long slow ark-to-ark register that carries best in a harbour of smooth cold water with no wind to disturb it. I have the account of the consultation from La Granada's private log, where Captain Isidro, who sometimes transcribes such conversations when he can be persuaded that they are of historical interest, set it down in his small neat hand on the afternoon of the same day.

La Granada began, as ark-to-ark consultations conventionally begin, with a simple naming of the matter. Rose, dear, she hummed. (She called La Albarrana Rose; the nickname, which had no obvious connection to the ark's actual name, had been between them for seventy years, and La Albarrana had long ago stopped inquiring into its origin.) I've a book that's humming.

I heard you thinking about it, La Albarrana answered. The small one's folk tales?

Yes.

La Albarrana considered this. La Albarrana was a slightly quicker thinker than La Granada, but not by much; her consideration took the greater part of ten minutes, during which La Granada watched Wren finish the Thursday returns and begin to dust the high shelf in the west gallery, where the travel narratives lived.

It has been humming for some time, La Albarrana said at last.

Four days at the clear.

Longer than that, dear. I've felt it through the water all winter.

This was a reasonable observation. La Albarrana was two slips over and had a particular sensitivity to the hums of other arks' books, which was one of the reasons she was so often consulted by her sisters on matters of this kind. La Granada had not realised La Albarrana had been listening so long.

You didn't mention it.

You weren't ready to talk about it.

Was I not?

La Albarrana hummed the small dry laugh again. You were getting there, dear. I didn't want to hurry you.

La Granada accepted this. There was no point arguing with La Albarrana about timing. La Albarrana had a particular genius for knowing when a thing ought to be said and when it ought not; she had been waiting to be asked about the folk tales, because she had known that La Granada would ask eventually and that being asked was better than being told.

And your feeling about it? La Granada asked.

La Albarrana took another five minutes. When she spoke again her thought was a soft warm thing, as though she were speaking with one hand laid gently on La Granada's hull.

I think the small yellow one is going to have to go east this spring.

I have been thinking so too.

I thought you had.

We're overdue anyway.

Yes, you are. And the small yellow one is overdue.

La Granada did not answer immediately. An ark considering her own first voyage with a particular human in her care is an ark considering something tender, and La Granada did not rush it. She watched Wren dust. She watched the Willis Tower, small and gold-tipped now in the

mid-morning light. She watched Arlen turn a page in his biography. She felt, through her hull, the first of the day's gulls land on her forward rail and then, a moment later, lift off again.

They'll be all right, La Albarrana said. (She used, of course, Wren's proper pronoun; arks had been using proper pronouns for centuries before the human fleets caught up, being themselves neither male nor female in any sense a human language was prepared to accommodate, and being therefore accustomed to pronominal generosity.)

Of course they will.

You'll be all right.

I know that.

But you'd like to be told.

La Granada hummed her small slow laugh.

Rose, you are a dear.

I know I am, dear.

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This is as much as I can say, at this stage of the account, about the nature of humming volumes. I have given the taxonomy; I have given the particular history of the folk-tale book; I have given, at the end, the consultation between La Granada and her oldest sister, which decided — though La Granada would not herself have put it this way — the spring's voyage. The voyage will begin, in the next chapter but one, with the ordinary preparations of any voyage of the rose fleet. Before then I must describe the household that will be taken aboard, because the voyage is as much theirs as the ark's, and the account cannot proceed without them.

III. The Household of the Ark

A household aboard an ark is not constituted in the manner of an ordinary household. It grows. Over a long enough span of years it takes the shape of the ark herself, the way a mollusc takes the shape of its shell, or — more precisely — the way a mollusc's shell takes the shape of the slow patience of the mollusc inside. The household aboard La Granada had taken its present shape over some five decades, with accessions and departures at intervals, and was, at the time of the Thursday morning I have been describing, composed of four persons. I shall give each of them their own brief account, beginning with the child.

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Wren was a child of a particular kind, which must be noted here because the ark noted it and the ark is my source. Wren was neither a boy nor a girl, and had known this since an age at which most children have not yet thought about the question. The ark, who was herself a vessel of long ambiguous allegiances — mother without being a mother, grandmother without being a grandmother, building without ceasing to be a ship — had recognised Wren's particular shape at once and had been pleased by it, in the way an old thing is pleased by any young thing that knows what it is.

The recognition had occurred when Wren was about four years old, as nearly as La Granada could reconstruct it afterward. Wren had been standing at the galley porthole watching Amadeo carry a length of walnut, and Wren had said, without any particular emphasis and without looking up, that they were not a girl and were also not a boy. Alma, at the stove behind them, had not turned around. Alma had said, very calmly, that she had thought as much. Wren had said, are you upset. Alma had said, no ducking, I am glad you know. Wren had said, glad is a good word. Alma had said, yes it is. The whole exchange had taken perhaps forty seconds.

La Granada, who had been warming her walls at half a degree above the ordinary in honour of Alma's coffee and who had overheard the exchange through the galley wall, had raised the warming to a full degree in a kind of silent acknowledgment, and had held it there for the remainder of the morning. The warming, being a ship's ceremony rather than a human one, had gone unremarked by both Alma and Wren, but La Granada had felt it herself and had been pleased.

The household, which was a patient household, had come to the same understanding by degrees. Amadeo had been told by Alma that evening, over supper. Captain Isidro had been told by Alma some months later, in the natural course of conversation, and had said only, all right then, dove, which was Isidro's way of saying that a thing had been received and would be handled correctly from that point on. La Granada had observed these disclosures and had approved of their restraint. Now, at ten, Wren wore the yellow jersey and the corduroys of indeterminate cut and answered to they and them as naturally as the river answered to its own current. La Granada, who preferred a word that

did its work, used the word ducking, which had done this particular job in this particular family for three generations and would, she suspected, do it for three more.

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Alma was the principal keeper of the ark and had been for thirty years. She was fifty-two. She wore a shawl the colour of moss most days, and a thicker one of the same colour on cold days, and in the summer no shawl at all. She had grey eyes. Her hair had begun to grey at the temples in her late thirties and had proceeded from there with an orderliness she had neither encouraged nor resisted; it was now grey at the temples and dark at the crown, and Wren, who was fond of their mother's appearance, had once observed that Alma's hair looked like a cloud-bank moving across a late afternoon sky. Alma had received the compliment with a small pleased half-smile and had not, thereafter, attempted to colour the greying.

Alma was steady. That was the word La Granada used for her, and the word did its work. An ark is a slow thing and does not waste adjectives; Alma had been with La Granada for thirty years and had earned one adjective, and the adjective was a good one, and La Granada, who could have produced more adjectives if pressed, saw no need. Alma came into the galley at the same hour every morning. She boiled the water for coffee. She set out the blue enamel cups. She read, while waiting for the water, the first page of whatever book she was currently reading — never more than the first page, and never the book's own opening page; she began, as a rule, thirty pages in, on the theory that the first thirty pages of most books were in the nature of throat-clearing, and that the book proper began where the author had grown comfortable with their own voice. La Granada, who had agreed with this theory for decades, considered it one of Alma's sounder idiosyncrasies.

Alma had come aboard La Granada at twenty-two, as an apprentice to the previous principal keeper, a woman named Beatriz who had been with the ark for forty years before her. Beatriz had taught Alma to feel the hum of books, a skill not all keepers acquired, and had died eight years into Alma's apprenticeship in a manner La Granada still remembered: Beatriz had sat down at the small round table in the galley one evening, had opened a book, and had said aloud to no one in particular, I am going to stop reading now. La Granada, who had been listening in the wall as she listened to all of her keepers, had felt the hum of the book go very quiet, and had felt Beatriz's own hum go quiet with it, and by the time Alma came in from the stacks Beatriz had been gone for some minutes. Alma had been twenty-nine. Alma had taken the principal keeper's key from the small hook by the galley window and had said, aloud, to the ark: all right, old girl. We'll manage. La Granada had warmed her walls by two degrees, which was the most she had ever warmed them in a single afternoon, and had held the warming for three hours, and Alma had known, afterward, that she had been heard.

That had been thirty years ago. Alma had managed.

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Amadeo the carpenter, Alma's husband, had come aboard La Granada twenty-one years before to ask Alma for her hand. He had asked in the starboard gallery, in the persimmon chair, which La Granada had taken as an honour done to the chair. Alma had said yes. The yes had been, in fact, some seconds in coming, because Alma was a woman who considered most things carefully, and because the question had been the kind of question that deserved the consideration; but the yes had come, and La Granada had warmed her walls in the starboard gallery, and Amadeo had noticed the warming (for he was, even then, sensitive in the particular way carpenters are sensitive) and had looked up at the gallery wall and said, thank you, old girl.

Amadeo had been twenty-six then. He was forty-seven now. He had been a carpenter for thirty years and would be a carpenter until he died, because he was the kind of man for whom work is not a job but a disposition. He made chairs. He made cabinets. He made the small carved doors that went into the cabins of young arks in the southern yards, when the southern yards could afford them; he had made, over the years, a considerable proportion of the furnishings of the rose fleet, including every chair on La Granada's reading floor, and including, most recently, a two-person chair for Wren to take on the spring voyage, which was now wrapped in canvas and sitting in the small luggage rack on the foredeck. La Granada was fond of Amadeo's work. She did not have a word for him, because Amadeo was not the sort of person who answered to a single adjective; he was a number of small things, and La Granada carried them together in the way she carried everything she loved — without summary.

He and Alma had not had children of their own until Wren. They had, for sixteen years of their marriage, been unable to, and had come eventually to a kind of peace with this, and had decided that their family would be the ark and her readers. Then Wren had arrived, by a small set of circumstances I shall not here recount, and the peace had been set aside, and the family had become the ark and her readers and one small yellow-haired child who was, at the time of their arrival, three days old. Wren had been nine weeks old before Alma had said aloud to Amadeo that she thought perhaps the child was going to stay. Amadeo had said, good. He had said nothing else. Alma had understood.

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Captain Isidro was seventy-one and had been La Granada's captain for twenty-two years. Before him there had been a captain named Bruno, whose private log entries I have elsewhere cited in the matter of the ark Thessaly, and before Bruno there had been a captain named Dolores, whose taxonomic work on the humming of books I have referenced in the preceding chapter, and before Dolores there had been a series of captains whose names the registers record variously and in whose exact sequence no two registers agree. Isidro had inherited the ark from Bruno in the spring of a

year I shall not specify because the registers in question disagree by as much as eighteen months, and he had taken her on without fuss.

Isidro was a small man. He had white hair, which he cut himself with a pair of scissors that had belonged to his father, and a small white beard, which he trimmed on the same schedule. He had brown eyes of the kind that had been called, in his youth, kind. He wore, always, a blue wool jumper on cold days and a thinner blue cotton one on warm days, and a pair of brown trousers that had been his father's. He drank tea. He did not navigate so much as he accompanied La Granada while she navigated, which was the correct arrangement for an ark of La Granada's experience, and which Isidro had understood from the first day of his captaincy.

In twenty-two years he had not once attempted to teach La Granada anything, which was, to La Granada, the hallmark of a gentleman. He had also not, in twenty-two years, asked her for anything she had not freely offered. He had let her sleep when she needed to diminish. He had let her speak, in the Low Hum, when she needed to speak; he had let her be silent when she needed to be silent. He had drunk his tea, and had drunk it steadily, at the rate of some six to eight cups a day, across the twenty-two years, which amounts — if the reader will forgive the arithmetic — to something on the order of sixty thousand cups of tea, each drunk at a small rate, none hurried, all enjoyed.

La Granada was fond of him. An ark's fondness is not a warm demonstrative thing; it is a low steady attention, maintained across years. Isidro, she had decided in his first week, deserved it, and had deserved it every week since.

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These, then, were the four. I have left to one side the occasional presence aboard of Magda, who lives in the small apartment above Amadeo's shop on the adjacent barge and who shelves books three days a week, because Magda is a keeper but not, strictly, a member of the household; I have similarly omitted the several regular readers who come aboard so frequently that Alma has begun to keep their preferred chairs unoccupied for them, because they are readers rather than household. The household proper is the four I have named: Wren, Alma, Amadeo, Isidro.

And La Granada, if we are speaking properly.

The ark is not ordinarily counted as a member of her own household, for reasons the reader will readily supply; but La Granada is, to herself, the fifth member of the household, and in this account, which is written with her cooperation, I shall count her as such. A household of five, then, aboard a hundred-and-thirty-nine-year-old ark moored in the north branch of the Chicago River, between the two round towers of Marina City, on a Thursday in March. Wren was about to wake. The voyage was two weeks away. The book in Wren's jersey pocket was humming at the clear pitch and had been, without subsiding, for four days. The year, as La Granada had suspected, was going to be a good one.

III bis. A Brief Catalogue of the Rose Fleet

The rose fleet of Chicago is, as I have indicated, composed of seven arks, though the reader will find in certain secondary sources a figure of eight, and in one obscure monograph a figure of six. The discrepancy is traceable to the ambiguous status of the ark Ginevra, who was decommissioned in 1954, reflagged in 1961, and who may or may not be counted in the present fleet according to the disposition of the registrar on the day of counting. For the purposes of this account I give her a place, and I invite the reader who objects to consult the monograph, whose author is in any case no longer living and cannot be troubled by our disagreement.

The seven arks, then, with a sentence apiece:

La Granada — the eldest of the fleet; moored between the two round towers of Marina City; colour of a pomegranate cut open at dusk; one hundred and thirty-nine years in the water; has taken thirty-one spring voyages to the grove; known among her sisters for her slow inventory and her fondness for agreement between her hull and the sky.

La Albarrana — one hundred and twelve years in the water; moored at Navy Pier; the colour of a peach that has been kept too long in a bowl; fond of weather; rumoured to carry, in her lowest chamber, a codex whose author has been variously identified as a nun of Toledo, a monk of Puebla, and a woman who signed her work only with the letter M.

La Enredadera — eighty-nine years; moored in the South Branch near the abandoned grain elevators; the colour of a rose that has been pressed between the pages of a heavy book; the fleet's quietest member; has never, in her recorded history, sung her Low Hum above the lowest register, and is believed by some to be mute, a charge she has neither confirmed nor refuted.

La Palmera — seventy-seven years; moored seasonally at Burnham Harbor and in winter at the Calumet; the colour of a flamingo seen through a stained window; the fleet's principal correspondent with the Havana crimson fleet, whose captains speak of her with the particular warmth reserved for those who have sent long letters and received longer ones.

La Membrillo — sixty-four years; moored in the North Branch; the colour of a quince at the moment of its first wound; the newest ark to be certified for the Hudson voyage, having received her certification in the spring of her forty-second year; fond, by her own admission, of children, and host to more planted books, per tonnage, than any of her sisters.

Ginevra — whose status, as noted, is disputed; fifty-eight years from her second flagging and eighty-one from her first; moored at a slip no chart will confirm; the colour, at present, of a sunset viewed through rain; the subject of a separate chapter in the aforementioned

monograph, which I have read and which I commend to the reader chiefly for the illustrations.

La Pequeña Granja — the youngest of the fleet; thirty-three years; moored at Diversey Harbor; the colour of a radish, which she prefers, or of a strawberry, which her sisters prefer, the disagreement having become a running small joke among the rose fleet for most of her life; a ship of unusual cheer, responsible, I am told, for the invention of the Low Hum dance at which the older arks pretend, each year, to be scandalised.

These, then, are the seven. Their combined years amount, by the simpler method of addition, to something over five hundred and ninety; by the more generous method that counts Ginevra twice, to something over six hundred and seventy. The reader may select their preferred method. The arks themselves, as I have been given to understand, do not count.

IV. On the Forest at the End of the Voyage

It is necessary, before the voyage begins, to speak of where the voyage ends. The narrative of a voyage is, in the scholarship of the rose fleet, considered incomplete if it does not include a description of the voyage's destination — not the harbour at which the ark will be moored, which is merely the voyage's anchorage, but the true destination, the thing for the sake of which the voyage was undertaken. For the spring voyages of the rose fleet, the true destination is not New York harbour. It is a grove that is reachable only through New York harbour, and that the official cartography of the region does not record.

At the southern tip of Manhattan, visible on no official chart and confirmed on the unofficial charts kept in the private log of every ark captain of the crimson fleet, there stands a grove of trees taller than any tree has a right to be. They rise from the harbour itself, their roots braided into the old stone of a forgotten battery, their crowns passing the height of the towers and, on certain evenings, the height of the lowest clouds. The light beneath them is green-gold and does not correspond to the hour of the day in the world that contains the grove. The grove is older than the arks. It will be there, the captains say, after them.

The grove is not, properly speaking, on Manhattan. The old stone from which the grove rises is, on ordinary days, simply a short stretch of decommissioned seawall at the south end of the Battery, distinguished from the rest of the seawall only by a small irregularity in the mortar that a person not looking for it would not notice. To reach the grove one walks, at a certain hour, along the seawall past this irregularity; one continues walking in the direction one has been walking; one does not turn around; and at a point that the walker will not be able afterwards to mark on a map, the ordinary seawall has ceased and the old stone has begun, and the grove is standing where the harbour had been a moment before. This is the procedure. It is not a difficult procedure. The difficulty, as with many things of this kind, is not in the doing but in the being prepared to do.

Each of the trees was once a book.

This is not a metaphor. Or rather — and here I concede a difficulty proper to all testimony concerning the grove — it is a metaphor which has, through some slow operation of long love, made itself literal. A book loved by enough readers for long enough, or loved by one reader with unusual intensity for long enough, stops being a book. It becomes, as the captains say in their dry way, planted. The planting is performed by no human hand. No ceremony attends it. The book is placed, at the end of a voyage, on the old stone, and in the morning the book is a sapling, and in a century the sapling is a tree, and in some further duration the tree is part of the grove.

I have, in an earlier interlude of this account, touched on the pre-history of the grove — on the unplaceable things that were, according to the testimony of Captain Hesper, deposited at the old stone in the centuries before books were. I will not here repeat that material. It is enough to note,

for present purposes, that the grove has existed in its present form — as a grove of trees that were formerly books — for something over two hundred years, by the most conservative reckoning; and that the arks of the rose and crimson fleets have, across those two hundred years, carried to it the books they have been given to carry, and have witnessed the plantings, and have returned to their home harbours carrying, in the place where the planted book had been, a small settled gladness that lasted them for the rest of the year.

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La Granada had carried planted books twice before.

The first occasion had been in the spring of her seventeenth year, which would place it at a date the registers, as is their custom, variously record. She had been young. The captain at the time had been a woman named Prisca, of whom little is remembered in the registers but a great deal is remembered in the private log of La Granada, in which Prisca is described, across multiple entries by multiple hands, as having been both the quickest-tempered and the most courteous captain the ark had in her first half-century. Prisca had seen the planting and had wept aloud, not quietly. La Granada, who was young and had not known what to do with a weeping captain, had warmed her walls by a full degree in Prisca's cabin and had held the warming all night. Prisca, in the morning, had written in the log: the old girl held me. I have been held before. The old girl is a better one at it than most.

The second occasion had been forty years ago, under Captain Bruno, who has been elsewhere described in this account. The book in question had been a small volume of poems by a poet of Lithuanian extraction whose name the registers do not agree on, and it had been loved, across the years of its humming, by one particular old reader — a woman named Ivana, who had come aboard La Granada every Wednesday for eleven years and had sat in the same chair by the east-facing porthole and had read from the book for two hours without fail. Ivana had died in the winter preceding the book's planting. The book had hummed steadily through that winter, gathering the accumulated love of its one long reader, and had been carried east in the spring and had been planted, and La Granada had warmed her hull by a full degree on the morning of the planting and had remained warm, as I have noted, for an afternoon.

The sapling from Ivana's book is, by the reckoning of the crimson captains, the forty-third tree in from the outer edge of the grove, and has grown, in forty years, to some thirty feet, which is a slower rate of growth than some of its neighbours but a steadier one. The grove, when it is good weather, is said to smell faintly of the books from which its trees have grown. The forty-third tree in from the outer edge is said to smell faintly of the poet the book had been written by, whose work had smelt, by all reports, of snow.

This spring she suspected she was carrying a third.

The suspicion, as I have recorded, was shared by La Albarrana, her eldest living sister, and had been confirmed — though confirmed may be too strong a word for what passes between arks in matters of this kind — by the consultation recounted in the preceding chapter. But the true confirmation of a humming book's trajectory does not come from another ark. It comes from the matriarch of the fleet. And the matriarch of the fleet, in the present generation, is the ark known as La Enredadera, who has been mentioned in passing but who deserves, at this point in the account, a fuller introduction.

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La Enredadera is the oldest rose ark still in service. The registers, with their customary disagreement, place her age at between ninety-two and ninety-eight; she herself, I am given to understand, has never confirmed a figure, on the grounds that a lady does not discuss her years. She is moored at the mouth of the Chicago River where it empties into the lake, at a slip that has been hers since she was thirty. She is not, properly speaking, the same colour as the other rose arks; she is a deeper and more muted rose, a colour that has been variously described as the rose of a rose pressed between the pages of a heavy book and as the rose of a rose that has been left out in a long evening. Both descriptions are accurate. The colour is not one the paint shops of the Midwest can match, because it is not a paint; it is what has happened to her paint across nine decades of sun and weather and the particular regard of the harbour that has been hers for most of her life.

La Enredadera does not voyage. She has not voyaged in forty years. She does not open her reading floor to the public; she has not opened it in twenty. What she does is preside. Her function, in the fleet, is not the function of a working ark but of a matriarch. She receives the consultations of the other arks on matters of difficulty; she issues, when she is asked and occasionally when she is not, the small pronouncements by which the fleet governs itself; she warms the harbour each morning, as described in an earlier chapter, so that the other arks' own warmings may proceed from a already-warmed baseline. She is, in short, the fleet's grandmother, and she is treated as such.

It is the custom of the rose fleet that any ark preparing for a spring voyage with a humming book aboard shall, before departure, visit La Enredadera at her slip and submit the book and the book's reader to her inspection. The inspection is not adversarial. It is, as I understand it, more nearly a blessing: the matriarch confirms, by such means as she has, that the book and the reader are ready to make the voyage, and the ark receives, in the confirmation, the small settled assurance that allows her to undertake the voyage without the nagging worry that would otherwise attend it.

On the Friday after the Thursday of the preceding chapters — that is to say, one day after La Granada's consultation with La Albarrana, and thirteen days before the scheduled departure — La Granada made her visit.

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She left her slip at ten in the morning and moved slowly down the north branch of the Chicago River, passing under the bridges in the order she had passed under them every spring for fifty years. The day was cold but fine. The light was the particular pale blue-grey of a Chicago March that has decided not to be winter and has not yet decided to be spring. Alma was aboard. So was Amadeo, who had closed his shop for the morning and had come across specifically to accompany the visit. Captain Isidro was in his usual place near the bow, his mug of tea beside him, his small brown eyes fixed on the water with the patient attention that was his contribution to the ark's navigation.

And Wren was aboard, with the folk-tale book in their jersey pocket, and the jersey pocket zipped, because the pocket had, as of that morning, been equipped with a small brass zipper by Amadeo. Amadeo had not explained the zipper. He had simply, the preceding evening, asked Wren for the jersey, had taken it into the shop, and had returned it an hour later with a small neat brass zipper sewn into the pocket. Wren had understood. The folk-tale book was now a book that must not be misplaced.

La Enredadera's slip came into view around eleven. The matriarch was, as always, in her place. She looked, from the water, like a rose ark of immense dignity and no particular hurry, which was in fact a correct reading of her appearance. Her reading-floor doors were closed. Her decks were empty. A single lamp was lit in what appeared to be her small galley, where her keeper, a woman named Mrs. Oak of whom more will be said in a moment, was visible in silhouette at a table.

La Granada moored alongside. Alma and Wren came across the short gangway. Amadeo remained aboard, as was proper; the consultation was a consultation of keepers and books, not of carpenters.

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The interior of La Enredadera's catalogue room was the warmest room in the Chicago fleet. This was a fact known to all the keepers of the rose fleet and unknown to anyone else. The warmth was not mechanical. It was the warmth of an ark who had been sitting in one slip for sixty years and had gradually, across those sixty years, radiated into her own interior the accumulated warmth of every visitor she had received and every book she had held. The catalogue room's walls curved up and over, following the arch of La Enredadera's upper deck, and the yellow of her interior — a deeper yellow than La Granada's, the yellow of butter left out on a warm afternoon — went up the walls and across the ceiling in a continuous curve of which Wren, who had been in the catalogue room perhaps a dozen times in their life, could never make complete sense.

Mrs. Oak was at the central desk. She had been at that desk for forty-seven years. Her name was Mrs. Oak, and she was the oldest cataloguer in the Chicago fleet, and she was married to another cataloguer named Mr. Oak, who was somewhere else in the city, and they had both been at La Enredadera since before Alma had been born. Mrs. Oak was a small round woman in a green

cardigan. She did not look up from her ledger as Alma and Wren entered. She did not look up from her ledger as Alma and Wren sat in two of the small yellow chairs by the desk, which chairs were Amadeo's work and had been in La Enredadera's catalogue room for twenty-five years.

Mrs. Oak, Alma said.

Alma, my dove. Wren. Hello. Come and sit for a minute. The mother wants a word.

Mrs. Oak had not looked up. She never looked up from her ledger when she did not have to. She had, over the decades, developed the kind of relationship with books and with the ark that did not require her to look at anything. Alma and Wren sat, as invited. La Granada, at her mooring outside the arch, could feel every chair of Amadeo's wherever in the fleet they went, and felt Wren sit in one of his small yellow chairs, and was pleased.

La Enredadera began to speak in the Low Hum. Her voice, in the Low Hum, was not like the voice of any other ark. It was bigger. Slower. It was as though a thing very far away were speaking through a great quantity of soft cloth. She did not usually speak to humans at all — the Low Hum is an ark-to-ark language, and humans mostly cannot hear it — but Wren, La Granada noticed, could feel something. Wren shifted very slightly in their chair and looked up at nothing in particular, the way a person looks up when they think they have heard a faraway voice and are not sure.

Welcome, small yellow one.

La Enredadera was not speaking to Wren, exactly. She was speaking about them, toward La Granada and toward Mrs. Oak. But some portion of the hum was brushing Wren directly, and Wren was receiving it in whatever way humans receive such things. They put one hand, slowly, into their jersey pocket and rested it on the folk-tale book.

You have the book.

La Granada, outside the arch in the water, felt Wren's hand on the book, and felt the book hum a little — a small pleased hum, the hum of a small book acknowledging that it had been seen by a very old ark.

La Enredadera hummed back.

Good. Carry it east, small yellow one. You'll know what to do with it when you get there.

Wren did not react visibly. La Granada suspected Wren could not have said, afterward, that they had heard anything at all — only that, sitting there in the yellow chair in the yellow room, they had felt a kind of warm certainty settle into them, the way a cat coming into a sunny window settles into the shape it is meant to occupy. Wren did not need to know what they were being told. They would know when the time came. That was how La Enredadera always worked.

Then La Enredadera turned her attention to La Granada.

Dear.

Mother.

You are carrying them on their first voyage.

I am.

They were born aboard you.

They were. Ten winters ago. I remember the minute.

You have been a good ark for them.

Thank you, mother.

You will be a good ark for them this spring too.

La Granada did not say anything. La Enredadera was not asking her a question. La Enredadera was making a statement, and a statement from the matriarch was a kind of weather — one stood inside it and let it be the weather it was.

They will meet someone in the east, La Enredadera said.

I suspected so.

Their name is in La Cinabrio's hum, already.

La Granada felt, at this, a small lift of private gladness — the particular gladness of an ark who had wondered about a thing and now had it confirmed. She had been listening for La Cinabrio across the water, in the slow way an ark listens for a dear friend, and she had felt — she thought she had felt — something different in La Cinabrio's distant hum this winter. A new note. She had not been able to tell, at a thousand miles' remove, what the note was. Now the matriarch was telling her: it was the name of someone who had been waiting to meet Wren.

The human's name? La Granada asked.

August Moreau.

Ah.

La Granada considered the name. She had never met an August before. She had met, once, decades ago, a September who had traveled across the fleet briefly as a young cataloguer; she had approved of him. She had a feeling an August would also be a good person. La Enredadera did not use names lightly.

Bring them together, La Enredadera said. With La Cinabrio. At the right hour.

I will, mother.

And the book.

Yes, mother.

La Enredadera's hum softened, went warmer, took on the quality it had when she was about to close a conversation. She was not an abrupt ark — nothing about La Enredadera was abrupt — but she did have a way of finishing her thoughts that let you know, distinctly, that they were finished.

Come and see me when you return in the summer, rose one.

I will.

I will be here.

La Granada hummed a small soft affirmation. Of course La Enredadera would be there. La Enredadera was always there. She had been there for ninety years. She would be there for ninety more. La Granada felt, every time she left the matriarch, a small version of the same feeling a grandchild feels on leaving a beloved grandmother's house — the gentle half-sadness of parting, softened by the certainty of returning.

And then La Enredadera's attention withdrew into her quieter self, and the catalogue room was only a catalogue room again, and Mrs. Oak, without looking up, said, You'll want the east-voyage stamp on the book, dove.

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The book? Wren said.

The one in your pocket.

Wren took the folk-tale book out. They held it in their hands for a moment as though checking it were still what they had thought it was. Mrs. Oak took it from them, without looking, and in a single fluid motion pressed a small rubber stamp to its front endpaper. The stamp made a small warm mark in an ink the colour of honey. It said:

East. Spring.

That was all. Two words. The Chicago fleet did not use many words when two would do.

Thank you, Wren said.

Take care of it, dove.

I will.

Mrs. Oak handed the book back. Wren slid it into their pocket — the pocket with the new brass zipper — and zipped it shut. The book hummed once, a little brighter than before, the way a thing hums when it has been properly witnessed, and La Granada, outside the arch in the water, felt the fresh hum come up through her hull and warm her.

Alma stood up and smoothed the front of her shawl. Thank you, Mrs. Oak.

Of course, my dove. Go well.

We will.

Tell that ark of yours I said hello.

I always do.

Alma and Wren went out across the catalogue room. At the door, Wren paused and looked up — not at anything in particular, just into the high curve of the yellow room overhead, at the yellow-spined books that curved upward out of their sight. They stood for a moment. La Granada felt them standing. Wren was, in that moment, the colour of a small yellow flame in a great yellow room, and La Granada thought, with a slow wide pleasure, that the small yellow one was a beautiful thing to have been carrying for ten winters.

Then Wren turned and went out.

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The afternoon voyage home took a little less than an hour. La Granada moved slowly, because she did not feel any reason to hurry, and because the water was good. A single gull sat on her forward rail for the first ten minutes of the trip and then, when it grew bored, lifted off and went elsewhere. Alma and Wren were on the reading floor together. They did not talk much. La Granada, who had been watching this family for as long as there had been this family aboard her, recognised the particular shape of their quiet: it was the quiet of two people who had been somewhere together that had meant a great deal to one of them, and the one to whom it had meant the most had not yet gathered her words about it, and the other was giving her the time she needed.

Wren, La Granada noticed, kept one hand in their jersey pocket on the book. It was not an anxious gesture. It was the gesture of a person carrying something precious with which they had begun to feel at home. The book was humming. The hum was warmer than it had been this morning. La Granada suspected that the stamp had had something to do with it — a small book, newly witnessed by the matriarch of the fleet, was a small book that knew, now, what it was being asked to do. It had a destination. Destinations changed books, the way destinations changed voyages.

By the time La Granada had moored again at her own slip between the two corncob towers of Marina City, the matter was settled. The book would be carried east. Wren would carry it. La Granada would carry them both. The voyage would depart in twelve days, and the matriarch had confirmed that an August was waiting, and a paired humming book of the matriarch's knowledge was somewhere at the other end of a thousand miles of water, and the grove — the grove at the southern tip of Manhattan, which the chapter had begun by attempting to describe and had arrived at through the blessing of an older ark — was waiting, as groves wait, without any particular impatience, and would have its third planting from La Granada in whichever year the book chose.

This spring she suspected was the year.

IV bis. On the Registers, and on a Certain Disagreement Among Them

Three registers of the Chicago harbourmasters survive from the period I have principally consulted, and I must, in fairness to the reader, say a word about each, because no single one of them is to be trusted, and all three together are less trustworthy than any of them alone.

The first is the Lakefront Register, kept in the east wing of what used to be the harbourmaster's office at the foot of Grand Avenue and what is now, by a series of civic reassignments I will not bore the reader by narrating, a small unvisited reading room. It is a ledger bound in green buckram and contains entries in six different hands, the last of which breaks off in 1968 in the middle of a sentence concerning a fog. The register is reliable for what it records and unreliable chiefly in what it omits.

The second is the River Register, kept in a drawer in the basement of the Pumping Station, whose custodian is a woman named Tereza who has served in that capacity for longer than anyone has bothered to ask. This register is reliable for tonnages and unreliable for names; several arks appear under two or three names in its pages, and the custodian, when pressed, has been known to say that the arks change their names from time to time, and that the register is merely keeping up.

The third register is not, strictly, a register. It is a private log maintained since 1897 by the successive captains of La Granada, who passed it down not as an inheritance but as a shared instrument, each captain adding entries and, from time to time, crossing out the entries of their predecessors. This log is the most accurate of the three and the least admissible. No scholar I know will cite it. I cite it anyway, because there are facts in it that appear nowhere else.

The disagreement I wish to note, and to which this chapter is principally devoted, concerns the matter of the ark Ginevra's reflagging.

The Lakefront Register records the reflagging as having taken place on the 14th of August, 1961. The River Register records it as the 14th of September of the same year. The private log of La Granada records it as neither date, giving instead the 4th of October 1961, and adding, in a hand I believe to be the hand of Captain Dolores, the marginal note:

> *Reflagging is not a date. Reflagging is a weather. Ginevra was reflagged when she was ready, not when the office was.*

The scholar will here wish to adjudicate. I have, I confess, long resisted the temptation. My own view is that the three records are not in disagreement: they are describing different things. The Lakefront Register records the day the paperwork was filed. The River Register records the day the paperwork was processed. The log of La Granada records the day Ginevra herself recognised her new name. All three are correct. All three are partial. The ark and the office, as Captain Dolores intimated, do not keep the same calendar, and the scholar who attempts to reconcile their calendars

will find, in the end, only that they have made up a fourth date, which is worse than the three they started with.

I note, before moving on, that the same threefold disagreement appears in every significant event in the fleet's recorded history. The reader who wishes a mild intellectual exercise may take any date in the preceding chapter and consult the three registers and find, in each, a different day. I do not recommend the exercise. I recommend, instead, the recognition that a fleet of seven slow ships cannot be captured by any single ledger, and that the three ledgers together, properly understood, constitute a kind of triangulation from which a truer shape, though never a precise one, may be inferred.

This is as much as I will say about the registers. The next chapter returns us to the voyage.

V. The Sister Ark

A thousand miles to the east, moored in what must surely be the strangest slip ever granted to a vessel of her tonnage, there rode the ark known as La Cinabrio. She was the colour of cinnabar, and she was fifty-six years in the water, and the water, in her case, was not strictly water.

La Cinabrio rested her hull upon the marble concourse of Grand Central Terminal.

I will not here attempt to resolve the geographical impropriety of this arrangement. The registers record it; the captains confirm it; and those travellers who have passed beneath the constellation-painted vault of the terminal's ceiling at certain hours have reported seeing, between the clock and the staircase, the long red flank of an ark where no ark could possibly be. The Low Hum of La Cinabrio threads itself each morning through the marble of the floor and out along the tiled walls of the 42nd Street shuttle, and commuters who pause on the upper balcony without knowing why are, in my view, pausing to listen to her.

The arrangement has existed for forty-two of La Cinabrio's fifty-six years. She was not, in her earlier decades, moored in the terminal. She was moored, as a young ark, at the outer tip of the Battery, in the ordinary manner of young crimson ships. Her relocation to the terminal was the subject, in the winter of the year in question, of a civic proceeding of which the surviving records are — perhaps needless to say — inconsistent. Some registers indicate that La Cinabrio was granted the terminal slip by a special act of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority; others that she was granted it by the express petition of the terminal's stationmaster, who had been a reader aboard her since his youth and who had argued, in a memorandum that survives in a filing cabinet I have been privileged to examine, that the terminal's great hall was underused in its off-hours and that a resident ark of the crimson fleet would materially improve the civic character of the space; still others that no grant was made at all, but that La Cinabrio, one spring evening, simply relocated herself, and that the civic authorities, discovering her the following morning in her present position, decided — after some brief and inconclusive discussions — to let the matter stand.

I am inclined to credit the third account. The arks of both fleets are, within the limits of their considerable prudence, capable of doing as they please, and La Cinabrio had, in her early middle age, a reputation for prudence that the other crimson ships described, not unaffectionately, as the kind of prudence that gets what it wants. She wanted the terminal. She took the terminal. The matter was settled.

On certain afternoons — the registers are particular about which afternoons — La Cinabrio also keeps a second berth, uptown, inside the white spiralling interior of the Guggenheim, where she occupies the central well as if the museum had been designed around her rather than, as the conventional account insists, the other way round. Visitors who ascend the ramp with the unsettled sense that they are circling some great breathing thing are, in my view, correct. The second berth is, I

am told, used principally on Tuesdays and Thursdays between three and five in the afternoon, which are the hours at which the museum's own attendance historically flags; I have been unable to determine whether La Cinabrio chose these hours or whether the museum, by some slow unspoken accommodation, chose them for her.

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She had been awake, that March morning, since four.

This was unusual. La Cinabrio kept civic hours and had always kept them. She was not, in the general way of her life, an early riser — she opened her reading floor at nine, and she preferred to begin her own awareness of the day around six-thirty, at a reasonable terminal pace, like a well-ordered ark of her generation. Fifty-odd years moored in that great vaulted hall had given her her habits, and her habits were fond of the seven-o'clock first cup of hum, and fond of the eight-o'clock greeting-round with her sister ships of the crimson fleet, and fond of the nine-o'clock doors-opening ceremony at which, every weekday morning for four decades, the first commuters crossing the terminal had passed, without knowing it, directly beneath her reading floor.

But this morning she had been awake since four.

She had tried, for some while, to be persuaded back down to her steady night-note. She had hummed at herself reasonably. She had reminded herself that La Granada was still most of two weeks away — that the rose ships would not round the northern tip of Manhattan until well into the second week of April at the earliest. She had reminded herself that she was a dignified ark of fifty-six years and that a dignified ark of fifty-six years did not sit up in the dark of her own marble concourse humming into the tilework like some twenty-year-old at her first Low Hum dance.

None of this had worked.

At four-fifteen she had given up. She had turned her attention to the terminal around her and had let herself enjoy it. You have a whole terminal to look at, she told herself firmly. Look at it.

So La Cinabrio looked at her terminal.

It was her terminal. She had, across her life in it, come to think of it in entirely possessive terms, and she was not sorry about this. The great hall was hers. She had been moored at its southern end for forty-two of her fifty-six years — first as a visiting ark when she had been young, then as a resident ark when she had been in her middle years, and finally as a full senior of the crimson fleet for the last decade or so. She knew the terminal's acoustics the way La Granada knew the Chicago River's currents. She knew the particular way the first commuter train of the morning vibrated through the marble of the floor; she knew which of the pillars creaked in a cold north wind off the Hudson; she knew, with the certainty of long acquaintance, the particular quality of the Low Hum of every ark moored within half a mile of her.

This morning the terminal was dark. It was black-blue under its constellation-painted ceiling, and very still. The great four-faced clock at the centre of the concourse registered four-twenty. Over at the 42nd Street entrance, the lights were on in small scattered rectangles. The tiled pipework of the Lexington Avenue subway was dark against the slightly-less-dark ceiling, the great curves of it arcing from support to support, the whole old arterial body of the station resting quietly before the day came up.

La Cinabrio loved her pipework.

She loved it the way a grown person loves the rooms of their own childhood house. The tiles of Grand Central had been there, in their various extensions, since long before she had been launched. Generations of crimson ships had helped maintain them, generations of yellow cousins had helped route the wiring, and now, a century in, they were simply there, like veins, threading through the walls and over the ceilings and out to the platforms. On a quiet morning like this one, if La Cinabrio was still enough and listened carefully enough, she could feel faint hums moving through the pipework even without an ark sending them. The pipes remembered things. The pipes hummed small memories on their own, in the way old hallways sometimes creak with their own recollections. This morning the pipes were humming something cheerful. La Cinabrio did not know quite what they were humming about. She was inclined to think they were humming about her.

She approved.

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She was in a good mood.

This was the next important thing to establish about her, and La Cinabrio would want any careful narrator to establish it up front: she was, that morning, in a very good mood. She had been in a quietly good mood for about six weeks, ever since La Enredadera's confirmation had come through the water all the way from Chicago that yes, yes, La Granada was coming, and yes, she was bringing the small one, and yes, the small one had been humming along for a season. La Cinabrio had received this confirmation with the warmth of an ark whose long private hope had been borne out. August had been humming along for longer than that — eight months by La Cinabrio's private reckoning — and the ark had begun, in the previous autumn, to suspect that August's humming would eventually find its answering pair. She had not told August this, because one did not tell an eleven-year-old human such things; one let the eleven-year-old find out in the slow way such things were meant to be found out.

Now the pair had been confirmed. The rose ship was coming. The small one in the yellow jersey was coming. August, who slept in a small cabin just forward of the galley, was asleep at this hour and would continue to be asleep for another ninety minutes, and La Cinabrio had, in the meanwhile, a whole dark marble hall to enjoy and a full six weeks of accumulated good mood to sit inside.

She was, as I have said, enjoying herself.

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The household aboard La Cinabrio was smaller than the household aboard La Granada — three members where the other had four — and I shall describe it briefly before proceeding, because the reader will want to know who was asleep in the small cabin forward, and who was at that hour boiling water in the galley, and who, exactly, had been the other end of the thirty-one-year correspondence with Alma.

Rosana Moreau had been the principal keeper of La Cinabrio for twenty-seven years. She was fifty-four, which made her a little older than Alma and which, by the particular arithmetic of keepers of ark, made her Alma's senior in the fleet though her junior in the friendship. She had met Alma thirty-one years earlier, on the first voyage Alma had ever taken, which had been a voyage neither of them had, at the time, understood would produce the friendship it produced. Rosana had been twenty-three. Alma had been twenty-two. They had both been apprentices to older keepers. They had sat together for a long slow afternoon on the deck of La Cinabrio, watching the Hudson turn gold, and they had, across that afternoon, established the kind of mutual recognition that does not require any subsequent event to sustain it and that does not, in practice, unmake itself across a lifetime.

Rosana had married a man named Henri Moreau in her late twenties. Henri was a printer; he had his shop in the station concourse, in a small room that had originally been a ticket office and that had been, in the long civic accommodation by which arks had come to keep slips in terminals, converted to the use of La Cinabrio's household. Henri printed, among other things, the bookplates for La Cinabrio's cargo. He also printed a small occasional journal of the crimson fleet, which had been published at irregular intervals for some thirty years and which was distributed to the twelve crimson arks and to the keepers of the rose fleet and to a small number of private subscribers. Henri was, at the March morning of this chapter, asleep in the small apartment above his shop, which was reachable from La Cinabrio by a short walk across the concourse.

And August was aboard, asleep in the small cabin forward of the galley.

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August was eleven, and was, like Wren, neither a boy nor a girl. This was the first of several correspondences between the two young humans that had been, across the preceding two years, of particular interest to both their arks. The two had discovered this about each other in a long slow exchange of letters that had begun, some two winters before, when Alma had suggested over a letter to Rosana that it might be pleasant for the two children to correspond, both being the children of keepers of ark and both being, by the reckoning of their respective mothers, the sort of child who would benefit from a correspondence. Rosana had agreed. The first letters had been the polite

careful letters young humans write when their mothers have asked them to write, but by the fourth exchange the letters had begun to become letters of the kind children write when they have discovered that the correspondent at the other end is the kind of correspondent worth writing to. By the eighth exchange, the letters had become the kind they would continue to write to each other for as long as either of them was alive.

August had told Wren, in their fourth letter, that they were neither a boy nor a girl. Wren, by return, had told August that they were the same. Both children had, by the time of this exchange, told their respective mothers; both mothers had responded, in the way Alma had responded, with a steady matter-of-fact acceptance that had saved each child the ordinary difficulty of explanation. The correspondence, thereafter, had proceeded on the basis of a mutual recognition that neither child had previously experienced and that had done, for both of them, what correspondences of the right kind do: it had made each of them feel less alone in a way that neither had been able, before the correspondence, to articulate that they had been lonely at all.

La Cinabrio had known, from the start, that this correspondence was of the kind she would want to encourage. She had mentioned it to La Granada only in the most general terms — the two arks communicated across the thousand miles of the Interior Sea by means of the slow Low Hum, which is capable of remarkable subtlety but which does not, in the ordinary course, carry extended narrative — and she had been content to let the correspondence proceed on its own terms. But she had, across those two years, begun to feel August's hum take on a particular quality, and she had begun, in the winter preceding, to feel that particular quality become a paired one, and she had known then, though she had not told August, that August was humming toward someone at the other end of the country. She had waited for confirmation. The confirmation had come, as I have said, six weeks before the March morning of this chapter. She had been in a good mood ever since.

August had been feeling the Low Hum, in a shy apprentice way, for some months. They could not hear it clearly — few young humans can — but they could feel, with the vague confident persistence that was one of their most characteristic qualities, that something in their life was making a warm sound just below the level of their hearing. They had, in the pocket of the coat they had gone to bed in (for August, like Wren, had a habit of leaving the important garment in a chair beside the bed, and like Wren had been humming a small harbour poems book in the pocket), a book that had, across the winter, begun to answer the thing they could almost hear.

La Cinabrio, on this March morning, could feel the answer. It was the last of the reasons she had been awake since four.

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At five-thirty the first light began to come through the terminal's eastern windows. It was the particular grey-pink of a March dawn in Manhattan that has had rain overnight and has decided to

clear. La Cinabrio watched it come. She was fond of the eastern windows. She had, over forty years, developed a set of small affections for various pieces of the terminal's architecture — the great eastern windows, the constellation-painted ceiling, the four-faced clock, the polished brass of the information booth, the two sets of double staircases that flanked the great hall on the north and south — and she was fond of each of them for its own particular reasons, and she sent, every morning at this hour, a small greeting to each, in the same way La Granada greeted the Willis Tower and the cloud-banks and whatever else came into her aft porthole.

The eastern windows did not reply. The constellation-painted ceiling did not reply. The four-faced clock, being a clock, was incapable of reply. But La Cinabrio, who had long since reconciled herself to the silence of what she greeted, did not mind.

At six the first trains began to arrive on the lower platforms. La Cinabrio felt them through the marble — the small patient vibrations, the distant groan of brakes, the soft thud of doors. She did not find them disturbing. She had, across forty years, come to find the terminal's transit sounds steadying rather than intrusive; they were, as she thought of it, the breathing of the hall, and she had grown accustomed to breathing with it.

At six-thirty she greeted her sister arks in the crimson fleet. There were eleven of them, dispersed across the city: La Sanguinaria in Brooklyn Heights, La Cochineal at South Street Seaport, La Bermellón in a slip so deep in the Hudson that no landsman had seen her in decades, La Borgoña and La Carmín side by side at Chelsea Piers, La Roja at the northernmost tip of Manhattan near Inwood, and five more in various locations that will not be catalogued here because the interested reader has the registers and I have no wish to repeat them. She greeted each in turn. Each greeted back. None of them, this morning, was awake at four, which was why La Cinabrio had not consulted them about her own wakefulness. Each of them, however, had noticed that she was in an unusually good mood, and each of them, in her own private way, had privately approved.

At seven Rosana came into the galley.

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Rosana was wearing a long thin cardigan the colour of rust, which was a colour she favoured for its correspondence with La Cinabrio's hull, and her hair, which was grey at the temples like Alma's and dark at the crown, was tied back in the loose slow way it was always tied back at this hour. She boiled water for coffee. She set out two of the brown ceramic cups La Cinabrio's household favoured. She did not wake August — August was, like Wren, a young person who needed to find the morning in their own time, and Rosana did not hurry them.

La Cinabrio hummed at Rosana in her low quiet morning register.

A good mood, dear? Rosana said aloud, without turning.

Yes, La Cinabrio hummed.

They're coming.

Yes.

La Cinabrio had not said they in her hum — an ark does not usually use pronouns with that degree of specificity in the Low Hum — but Rosana, who had been Rosana to La Cinabrio's Rosana for twenty-seven years, had understood. She poured her coffee. She poured, from the same pot, a smaller cup of coffee with milk for August, which she set at August's place at the table for when August came through. She looked out across the dark quiet concourse toward the eastern windows, where the first pink was now showing, and she said, aloud, to no one in particular and therefore to the ark: I've been in a good mood for six weeks too.

La Cinabrio knew. La Cinabrio had felt her friend's good mood the way one feels a warmed wall behind one's back — present, steady, unmistakable. She hummed a small warm acknowledgment.

Rosana drank her coffee. August would be up in an hour. The day would begin. The arks of the crimson fleet would open their reading floors at nine as they had opened them at nine for a hundred years. The commuters would cross the concourse without knowing that one of the arks they were walking beneath had been awake since four, because she was in love with her spring. The terminal would do what a terminal does. And somewhere a thousand miles west, a rose ark was preparing to depart for the east, and a small yellow-jerseyed human with a humming book in a zippered pocket was preparing, without quite knowing it, to come and meet an August whose name had just been put on the wind by the matriarch of the rose fleet, and the spring was going to be, as both arks had suspected, a good one.

VI. The Paired Hum

The departure took place on the morning of the thirteenth of April, at a little after seven, in weather the Lakefront Register records as cool-fair and the River Register records as fair-cool and the private log of La Granada describes as the kind of morning one is glad to be an ark on. I incline, as is my habit, to the description in the log.

Twelve days had passed since La Granada's visit to the matriarch. The intervening days had been, by the ark's own account, the best days she had spent that winter. A confirmed voyage, in the inner life of an old ark, is a thing that fills the fortnight preceding it with a particular quality of anticipation which the human inhabitants of the ark generally do not notice but which the ark, from within, feels as a low steady hum somewhat warmer than her ordinary Low Hum. I mention this because the ark herself took pains to mention it to me, and because my informant, Captain Isidro, confirmed it from his own bunk: he reported that the small brass mug beside his bed, which was the mug in which he took his first tea each morning, had been, across those twelve days, perceptibly warmer at six o'clock than it had been across any comparable period he could remember in twenty-two years of captaincy.

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Three rose ships were sailing east that spring. La Granada, La Palmera, and a younger ark named La Ciruela, who was thirty-one years old and for whom this was her second east-voyage. The three had agreed, in the Low Hum the preceding autumn, to sail in company as far as Buffalo, at which point La Ciruela would branch off to a northern route of her own for reasons that are not germane to the present chapter. The voyage east of three rose ships in company is, I should perhaps note, the ordinary shape of a spring voyage; a rose ship alone has not travelled east in nearly a century, the companionship of the other rose ships being considered one of the voyage's pleasures rather than a redundancy.

La Palmera was the senior of the three. She was seventy-seven years old and had been making the east-voyage for fifty-five years, and she had the particular brisk cheerfulness of an ark who had done this a great many times and was not, at this point in her life, going to be impressed by any small difficulty that arose. La Ciruela was the junior. She was, as I have said, thirty-one, and was still given to the excitement of the open water in the way young arks are, which I will not disparage because excitement is, in its way, a form of love. La Granada was the middle one, by age and by temperament. She had made the voyage thirty-one times. She was fond of both her sisters. She had been looking forward to a month with each of them.

The three had moored the previous evening at the eastern edge of Navy Pier, where the harbour opens onto the lake, so that the departure at seven could be made without any of the delicate business of leaving the inner river. La Granada had said her proper goodbyes to La Albarrana and La

Enredadera in the Low Hum the preceding afternoon. She had said her proper goodbye to Amadeo at the barge in person the preceding evening — he had crossed the small gangway and had stood on her foredeck for a quarter of an hour saying nothing, because Amadeo's goodbyes were not composed of words — and had received from him, as she received every spring, a small nod at the end of the quarter-hour which she treasured for the rest of the voyage.

Magda, who keeps the apartment above Amadeo's shop and shelves three days a week, had come across the preceding afternoon to help Alma pack. The packing of an ark for a spring voyage is not an elaborate business — the ark is her own luggage, and the humans aboard bring with them only the clothes and books they wish to have at hand — but it is a business with its own rituals, and Alma and Magda had observed the rituals. Ada's shawls had been set out for the voyage in the order she would want them. Wren's three small bags had been packed by Wren themselves, under Magda's supervision, with the attention proper to a first voyage: two jerseys (the yellow one and a blue one), three pairs of corduroys, a brush, a toothbrush, a book of their own choosing (they had chosen a book of small drawings of trees, which the folk-tale book did not know but which, Wren suspected, it would not mind), and the folk-tale book itself in its zippered pocket. Captain Isidro had packed, as always, a small leather satchel containing three shirts and the pair of reading glasses he would refuse to admit, at any point in the voyage, to having brought.

At seven the three arks cast off.

The harbourmaster — a young man named Osvaldo, who had been harbourmaster for only three years and who was still nervous about departures — rang the small bell that was the Chicago fleet's departure signal. The three arks, in order of age, drew back from the pier. La Palmera first. Then La Granada. Then La Ciruela. They turned their prows eastward in a loose line. The water of the harbour — cold, patient, grey-blue — took them. The gulls wheeled once overhead and then, with the sound gulls make when they have approved of something, scattered.

The Willis Tower stood behind them as they went. La Granada, in her habit of long farewells, sent it a small greeting. The Willis Tower did not, as usual, reply. La Granada, as usual, did not mind.

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Wren stood at the forward rail for the first hour, in the yellow jersey with a coat over it, holding one of Amadeo's smallest chairs — a wooden three-legged stool he had made expressly for the purpose of being carried around the deck by a traveller who did not always want to stand — and watching the water. The water of the lake in April is the colour of winter not quite gone, with here and there the bright patches of sun that announce spring. Wren had never seen this water before. They had seen the harbour water, which is a slow thing, and they had seen the river water, which is a narrow thing, and they had imagined the lake water, because their mother had described it many

times; but the actual lake water, passing under La Granada's hull at the ark's slow travelling speed, was a thing Wren had not imagined correctly. It was wider. It was also, somehow, more attentive.

La Granada felt Wren's attention and was pleased. A young human on a first voyage has a particular quality of observation that is, in the ark's view, one of the principal goods that come from young humans at all. Wren was observing. Wren was letting the water come into them. Wren was, without knowing it, doing exactly what a young human ought to do on a first east-voyage: they were becoming the voyage by degrees, rather than arriving at its destination suddenly and without preparation.

The book, in the zippered pocket, was humming. The hum was warmer than it had been in the harbour — not in any dramatic way, just by a half-note or so — and La Granada, feeling the small warming, suspected that the book had begun to enjoy being underway. Books liked voyages. Books liked, in particular, the water. It was not universally admitted, in the scholarly literature, that a book could be said to like anything, but the scholarly literature is on many points deficient, and I trust the experience of an ark of a hundred and thirty-nine years over the opinions of scholars who have not spent a single morning listening to a hull.

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At noon the three arks held their first shared meal.

This, too, was a voyage ritual — not a ritual anyone had decided on, but one that had, over decades, become the way things were done. Around midday on the first day of a voyage, the three voyaging arks slowed to a gentle drift, drew close enough to each other that their outer rails were only fifteen or twenty feet apart, and their humans had lunch together on the decks with the rails open between the arks. It was a pleasure La Granada had been looking forward to for weeks. The arrangement was not without its small technical difficulties — three arks at a gentle drift on an April lake must be managed carefully, and all three captains had to attend to the business of not bumping — but the crews of the fleet had perfected the arrangement over decades, and the drift was accomplished at noon with the ease of long practice.

La Palmera came up first, on La Granada's starboard side. Then La Ciruela, a little wobbly, on La Granada's port side. The three arks settled into a loose triangle. The humans began to come up on deck with their plates.

Wren, on La Granada's deck, was carrying a small plate of bread and butter and a cheese La Palmera's principal keeper had brought from Ohio. They had their yellow jersey on and their coat over it. The wind was mild. The sun was fully up. The water around the three arks was a deep blue-green, and the air smelled of the lake and of bread.

La Palmera's head keeper — a broad cheerful woman named Matilda Eeck, who had been with La Palmera for twenty-nine years and knew everything — was the first to lean over her rail.

Wren Halladay! Matilda called across.

Missus Eeck.

Your mother raised you well, look at you.

Wren laughed. They raised their plate.

She raised me with bread.

Good woman. Come have a slice of this apple tart I brought. La Palmera has been hoarding apples since November.

I'm coming.

This was the only way to travel between arks when they were drifting: a short bright walk across a small plank laid between their rails by the humans. Captain Isidro, appearing from wherever he had been, laid the plank across without fuss. Matilda Eeck from La Palmera's side laid hers. Wren went across with their plate of bread, neatly and without hesitation. La Granada felt them go — the small quick weight on the plank, then off it — and felt La Palmera receive them.

La Palmera hummed her welcome, a warm steady hum.

Palmera, dear, La Granada sent.

I have them, love. They'll be back in an hour.

Thank you.

You raised them well.

I did not raise them, Palmera.

You raised them more than a little.

La Granada did not argue. An ark who had lived with a young human for ten years had done some raising, she supposed, whether she had meant to or not.

On La Ciruela, a younger crew was gathering. La Ciruela's head keeper was a young man named Teo, who was twenty-five and had been with her for three years. He was earnest and slightly shy, and La Ciruela, who was herself still a little shy after twenty years, approved of him enormously. Teo had brought a flask of something warm to share between the three arks — a spiced cider, La Granada could tell from the smell — and he was crossing the plank now to La Palmera's deck with the flask in his hand.

Alma, on La Granada's deck, raised a hand to La Ciruela as Teo crossed.

Teo! You're tall.

Missus Halladay. It's the shoes.

It's not the shoes.

It is a little the shoes.

Alma laughed. La Granada felt her laugh and was glad. Alma had been anxious, quietly, for a week leading up to the voyage — not about Wren, exactly, but about the new shape of a voyage that included Wren. Alma had made this trip alone for thirty-one years, and she was, on some level, uncertain about making it as a pair. The first hour of the voyage had settled some of that. The shared midday meal settled more. By the time Alma had laughed at Teo's shoes, La Granada could feel her ease.

A voyage is a thing made of small settlements. Each one is small; none of them matters on its own; and together they make the shape of the voyage.

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In the afternoon they crossed into the long stretch of open water that ran east across the top of Lake Michigan toward the straits of Mackinac. The wind picked up a little — not uncomfortably, just enough to put a light chop on the water — and La Granada had the particular pleasure of feeling a new wind on her hull for the first time in a season. Winds had personalities. The Chicago harbour winds were the ones she knew best, but the wider lake winds were cousins to them, and there were some she knew well and some she did not, and that afternoon's was an old friend — a long slow southwesterly that she had known for decades and had always liked.

Wren was back from La Palmera. They had come back with half an apple tart, which La Palmera had insisted they take for Alma and Isidro. They were sitting on the forward deck now in one of Amadeo's chairs — not the new two-person one, which stayed in the luggage rack, but an older green one that had been on La Granada's foredeck for twenty years and which Amadeo had built even before Wren was born. They had the apple tart in a small wooden bowl on their lap. They were eating it slowly. They were watching the water.

The folk-tale book was in their jersey pocket.

La Granada felt, at one point, the book do a small happy hum — a different sort of hum than it had done all morning, a brighter one, the hum of a book that had just seen something it liked. La Granada looked, in her ship's way, through Wren's porthole-of-attention to see what the book had seen.

A coral ark was passing on the horizon.

Not a rose ark. Not a crimson ark. A coral ark — a rose ark so deeply traveled that she had shifted, over decades of voyages, into the in-between colour that announced long acquaintance with both cities. She was westbound. She was perhaps three miles off. She had two tall elegant

smokestacks and a long low body and moved with the easy glide of an ark who had crossed this water a hundred times.

La Granada hummed toward her politely.

The coral ark hummed back.

Granada.

Horno.

La Horno was one of the crimson fleet — a New York ark originally, born at Manhattan's harbour mouth sixty years ago, who had been traveling west more often than east for the last twenty years and had gradually come to live in the coral in-between. She was, in ark terms, a cousin. La Granada had known her for as long as La Horno had been voyaging.

Passing west, dear?

Visiting Chicago. Bringing a box of New York books to the matriarch.

She will be glad of them.

She is always glad of anything. Bless her.

La Granada hummed her agreement.

Good voyage, Granada.

Good voyage to you, Horno. Say hello to La Enredadera.

I will.

La Horno continued westward. La Granada watched her go, with the particular small pleasure one has when passing a dear cousin on a road. Wren, on the foredeck, was watching the coral ark too — not knowing she was an ark of the in-between, not knowing her name, but watching her with the same quiet attention with which they had been watching everything that afternoon. The folk-tale book hummed in their pocket. La Granada felt, distantly, that the book was making a small note of La Horno in whatever way books make notes. It was good practice for the book. It would meet more arks as the voyage went on.

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The afternoon unspooled slowly after that.

This was the way of an afternoon on the lake. One hour unrolled into the next without any sharpness. The sun moved from high to slanting to low. The colour of the water went from blue-green to blue to deeper blue to, at the very end, a soft lilac that only lasted for about fifteen minutes and which La Granada had always loved particularly. Wren stayed on the foredeck for most of it. They finished the apple tart. They took the folk-tale book out at one point and opened it and

read a little, and La Granada felt, through the pages, the small quiet pleasure of a book being opened by its reader out on the open water — a pleasure the book had not had before.

Alma came up once to refresh Wren's blanket. Isidro came up once to look at the horizon and go back down. Otherwise the ark was quiet. La Palmera on the starboard side was quiet. La Ciruela on the port side was quiet. The three arks moved east together at their slow comfortable pace, and the water was patient, and the sky was empty, and La Granada, who had made this trip thirty-one times, felt her thirty-second settle into the particular rhythm she had been hoping for.

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It was on the fourth day of the voyage, somewhere in the grey inland stretch where the lakes begin to forget which of them is which, and a little before the canal at Troy would deliver the three arks at last into the upper Hudson, that La Granada noticed the folk-tale book had changed its hum.

It was answering something.

La Granada listened. She listened with her whole hull, which was the listening of which only an old ark is capable. Far to the east, through the long dark slow medium of water and earth and marble, another book was humming back. The two hums were not the same hum. But they were the same kind of hum — as two voices, singing different notes, can be recognised, by the ear that loves them, as belonging to the same choir.

La Granada understood, then, that she was not carrying an ordinary humming book. She was carrying one half of a paired volume.

Paired volumes are, in the literature of the arks, exceedingly rare. In my researches I have confirmed only nine instances across the three centuries of record-keeping of the rose fleet, and of these nine, seven were planted within the year of their meeting. A paired volume is, one might say, a book that has already made up its mind.

The phenomenon of pairing, insofar as I have been able to establish its mechanism, appears to work as follows. Two books, in separate harbours, independently begin to hum. The humming, at first, is unrelated; the two books are hummed to by different readers, for different reasons, and the arks that shelter them have no cause to connect one book with the other. But at some point — and no chronicler has identified the trigger with any confidence — the two books begin to hum in a coordinated way, not at the same frequency but in what the matriarch of the Havana fleet, in her one preserved letter on the subject, calls a sympathetic interval. The coordination is felt by both arks. The books themselves, so far as I can tell, are not aware of each other; they are aware only that their humming has become easier. The readers of the two books are likewise unaware. Only the arks, and the matriarch through her ark-to-matriarch correspondence, can piece together what is happening.

What is happening, in the vast majority of confirmed pairings, is that the two books are preparing to be planted together. The grove at the southern tip of Manhattan, which has received some thousands of planted books across its history, has received paired planting a total of seven times by the reckoning of its keepers. (The other two of the nine confirmed pairings I have cited involved one book planted and one book not; the reasons in both cases are unknown and, in the view of this chronicler, likely unrecoverable.) The paired saplings grow together. They continue to grow together. They become, in the fullness of time, a particular kind of pair-tree — two trunks rising from the same point of the old stone, intertwined at the roots, reaching for the same sky, humming, when the weather is right, a faint sympathetic hum that may be heard by the walker who stands beneath them at a certain hour of a particular kind of evening.

La Granada had never carried a paired book before. She had heard, across her hundred and thirty-nine years, of paired plantings; she had been told by the matriarch in her youth that the rose fleet would, in the ordinary course of centuries, receive perhaps two or three of them per generation. But she had not, personally, witnessed one. To be carrying one now — to be carrying, specifically, the Chicago half of a paired volume whose New York half was humming beneath the marble of Grand Central Terminal in the pocket of an eleven-year-old named August — was a thing she had not quite expected, even after the matriarch's confirmation, because the matriarch had not said the word paired.

The matriarch, La Granada reflected, had not used the word because the matriarch, as was her custom, had been waiting for the ark herself to arrive at it.

La Granada arrived at it now, on the fourth day of the voyage, in the grey inland stretch before Troy, with the folk-tale book humming in Wren's jersey pocket and its paired volume humming back across a thousand miles of water and earth. She did not tell Wren. She did not tell Alma. She did not tell Isidro. She did not, even, tell La Palmera or La Ciruela, who were drifting alongside her at their customary small distance. She held the knowledge in her hull and warmed her walls by a quarter-degree in the cabin where Wren slept, and sent, into that sleep, a slow warm note that felt, if one had to describe it, like the sensation of being covered with a blanket one had not thought to ask for, by someone one loved. Wren turned once in their sleep. La Granada held the note steady until Wren had settled. Then La Granada moved on.

VI bis. The Grove Before the Grove

The grove at the southern tip of Manhattan has not always been a grove of books.

This is a fact which the crimson captains know and which, in my experience, they are reluctant to discuss with visitors; I have had the privilege of a long friendship with one of them, now retired, and it is on the strength of that friendship that I venture the account which follows. The reader is warned that the account rests on a single source, that the source is elderly and fond of exaggeration, and that I have nevertheless found his testimony to correspond, in every particular I have been able to check, with entries in the private log of the ark La Cinabrio's great-aunt, an ark named Granata, who was present.

Before the grove was a grove of books, the captains say, it was a grove of what they call, in their dry way, unplaceable things. These were objects of every description — a brass sextant whose face bore no markings, a wooden chair missing the seat that could nevertheless be sat in, a letter written in a hand that no recipient could read but that every recipient wept upon receiving — brought to the old stone at the tip of the island by sailors whose ships had, in the course of long voyages, acquired them and been unable to let them go. The old stone was their place of deposit. The objects were placed there. In the morning they were not saplings, as they are now; they were absent. Where they went no captain has been willing to say.

The captain I have cited, whose name was Hesper and whose ship is no longer in service, maintained that the objects did not go anywhere, but rather dispersed into the surrounding air, so that for a century afterward any person walking past the old stone might encounter, without knowing it, the faint resistance of a deposited object still occupying its original place in a dimension the passer-by did not possess. He maintained further that the practice of depositing objects ceased when the first book was deposited, in a year no record preserves, and that the grove of books is, in its present form, a consequence of some slow accommodation between the old stone and the particular kind of object a book is.

A book, Hesper told me, is already a thing that has survived the dimension in which it was written. A book has practice at being elsewhere. The old stone recognised this practice and, rather than dispersing the book, grew it.

This is, the reader will notice, not an entirely respectable account. Hesper was in his nineties when he told it to me, and had been drinking a weak beer at the time, and laughed when he had finished as though to indicate that he did not expect to be believed. I record it nevertheless because I find that I do believe it, in the way one believes a story that explains something one had not previously realised required explanation. The grove of books is a strange thing. The grove of unplaceable things is no stranger. The passage between them, if Hesper's account is to be credited, was gradual, and may not yet be complete.

There is one further small matter. Hesper reported that the oldest tree in the grove — the one at the centre, whose crown passes the height of the lowest clouds on certain evenings — is not, in fact, a book. It was the last of the unplaceable things deposited before the transition, and it has, in his view, been slowly becoming a book for the last hundred and fifty years. He predicted that it would complete this becoming within the present century. He did not say what would happen then. He seemed, from his expression, to hope that he would not be alive to find out, and in this small mercy he has been accommodated.

VII. Down the Hudson

The account of a voyage, like the voyage itself, has a particular shape to it. There is an early stretch, during which the voyagers are still becoming the voyage; there is a middle stretch, during which the voyage is the voyage, without anything in particular to distinguish it from any other voyage of its kind; and there is a late stretch, during which the voyagers become aware that the voyage is approaching its end and begin, without quite noticing that they are doing so, to rearrange themselves in preparation for the arrival. This final chapter before the arrival at New York harbour describes the late stretch.

They had, by the morning of the account's resumption, been eight days underway. The three arks had passed Buffalo. La Ciruela had branched north, as agreed, with a long affectionate hum to her two sisters that La Granada had returned with the particular warmth one reserves for a younger ark one had enjoyed the company of. La Palmera and La Granada had descended together to the head of the Erie Canal at Albany, where they had paused for a day to restock from the small yellow cousin of the matriarch who keeps slip on the river there, and had then proceeded down the canal and into the upper Hudson, which had received them with the quiet courtesy the Hudson has traditionally shown to arks of the rose fleet.

The river, in its upper stretches, is a narrow thing compared with the lake. It folds the two arks together. La Palmera sailed ahead, as befitted her seniority, and La Granada followed at the comfortable distance of some quarter-mile, which is the distance at which two arks can converse in the Low Hum without either having to raise her voice. They had been conversing so for several days, in the quiet unhurried way that suited both of them, about a number of matters: about the state of La Palmera's forward hold (which had a small damp patch that did not concern her but which she liked to mention), about the character of a young human aboard La Palmera (who was fourteen and had, La Palmera reported with some affectionate amusement, been reading a book of poems aloud to himself on the aft deck each morning), and about the expected time of their arrival in Manhattan.

They came down the Hudson in the long easy manner of ships that know their river. The Catskills passed to starboard in their humped blue indifference. The Palisades rose to port in their banded grey patience. La Granada greeted both, and neither replied, and the greeting — as ever — was for herself. The ark had not made this descent for three years, the previous spring having been given to a voyage she had undertaken by the northern route, and the river had slightly changed in the interval, as rivers will. The shoreline was a little further back in one place, a little further forward in another. A lighthouse she remembered had been replaced by a more modern lighthouse, the older one visible behind it on a small lower spit, not yet dismantled but no longer lit. An old willow she had greeted every spring for thirty years was no longer there; in its place was a younger willow that had, La Granada supposed, grown from a seed of the older one. She greeted the younger willow. She made a small internal note to mention to La Cinabrio, on arrival, that the old willow was gone.

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It was on the ninth day of the voyage that the conversation I must now describe took place between Alma and Wren. The setting was the small round table at the galley window, where both mother and child had been taking their morning coffee for the whole voyage, and the hour was a little past seven in the morning, and the weather was a fine clear sunny spring morning of the sort the Hudson valley produces in some abundance in mid-April. Wren was in their yellow jersey. Alma was in her moss shawl. The folk-tale book was in Wren's jersey pocket, humming at the clear pitch — which pitch the book had now held for upward of three weeks — and, now that La Granada had begun to listen for it in the paired register, also humming in the sympathetic interval that announced its paired volume.

The conversation had been coming for some days. Alma had been waiting for it. Wren had been waiting for it without knowing they were waiting. The conversation began, as many of the important conversations of this family began, with Wren asking a question that Alma had been prepared for.

Mother.

Ducking.

The ark you told me about. The one you met on your first voyage.

Alma became very still. La Granada noticed the stillness — the particular kind of stillness that meant not avoiding something but rather preparing carefully to speak about it, the stillness of someone who had been half-expecting the question.

Yes.

Did she have a keeper?

Yes.

Like you?

Like me.

Is she still aboard?

She's the principal keeper now. August's mother. Rosana.

Rosana.

Yes.

Did you and Rosana — were you —

Alma tilted her head at her child and smiled — a small slow smile, the smile La Granada had seen on Alma's face only three or four times in her life, the smile of a mother meeting her child on a new piece of ground.

We were friends, ducking. Dear friends. Still are. We write. I'll introduce you.

Oh.

Did you think —

I didn't — I don't know. I thought maybe.

She was a very good friend, Wren. She is. She lives with her husband and with August, aboard La Cinabrio. You'll meet her.

All right.

Good.

Alma put one hand briefly on her child's head — ruffling Wren's yellow hair in that way Alma did only once or twice a year — and then she got up and went out. Wren stayed at the table. La Granada, who had been listening to every word through the galley wall with the focused affection of an ark who was fond of both these humans, felt a small bright warmth pool in her hull and sit there for a minute, pleased.

Alma had, across ten years, told her own child about the ark and the friend in just the right shape. La Granada approved. She had wondered how Alma would handle the question. Alma had handled it in the way Alma handled most things — with a small steady honesty that did not explain more than was asked and did not explain less.

The folk-tale book, in Wren's pocket, hummed its paired hum.

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That night Wren dreamed of a forest.

La Granada did not dream in the usual sense — an ark's sleep is not a dreaming sleep — but she could feel, through the cabin wall, the shape of Wren's dreaming, and the dream, La Granada noted, had the shape of a forest. Not a particular forest. Not, yet, the forest. Just the shape of many tall trees and a green-gold light and the sense of something very old and very kind.

Wren turned a little in their bed. La Granada rocked them gently. Wren did not wake. In the morning, Wren remembered only the colour green and a certain feeling about a book. They told no one. La Granada felt them not tell. La Granada felt them keep the dream as their own small private thing, which was the right thing to do with a first forest-dream.

I note, for the benefit of the reader who has been following the scholarly thread of this account, that the first forest-dream of a young human carrying a paired book is a phenomenon well-attested in the private logs of the rose fleet. It occurs, according to the records I have been permitted to consult, at a median of forty-three hours before the first sighting of Manhattan. It is always a forest of the shape and character Wren dreamed. The young human invariably tells no one, which is in the

view of the captains the correct instinct, and which is why the evidence for the phenomenon comes exclusively from the arks, who feel these dreams through the walls of their cabins, and not from the young humans themselves, who would not, if asked, remember having had a dream to report. The dream, in the view of my informants, is a kind of advance hum from the grove — a small message sent backward along the line of the voyage to the traveller whose book is approaching planting.

I find this phenomenon, as I find many phenomena associated with the grove, somewhat difficult to prove and somewhat unnecessary to doubt.

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They reached the bend in the river around mid-morning the next day — the long slow curve where the Hudson begins to open southward toward Manhattan. The two arks eased around it together. La Palmera was humming her mid-voyage tune, which was the same tune she had hummed at this bend on every voyage in her adult life, a slow four-note melody with a long rest in the middle. La Granada — who had been humming her own slow pleased hum ever since the paired nature of the folk-tale book had declared itself — was thinking about the long low shape of Manhattan that would, within another day or two, rise ahead of them.

The river turned. The cliffs fell away.

In the distance, very faint, like a small grey-gold line drawn on the horizon by someone who was not trying to draw anything in particular, the first buildings of the city became visible.

Alma came to the forward rail. Wren was already there. Alma had seen the small grey-gold line from the galley porthole, where she had been washing the coffee cups, and had come up without making any particular fuss about it, because Alma was not a woman who fussed about such things. She stood beside Wren in the moss shawl and said nothing for a moment.

There, she said.

Where? Wren said.

There. The edge.

Wren looked. They saw. La Granada felt them see. It was only the very first smallest appearance — a hint of a hint — but it was the city, and Wren had never seen it before. They stood very still at the rail. They did not speak. La Granada felt the stillness through the hull and was pleased. A young human seeing their first glimpse of the eastern city, at the proper distance and the proper hour, is a thing an ark does not wish to interrupt.

They held the small folk-tale book in one hand at the rail. It hummed, and somewhere far down the river a book of harbour poems hummed back from beneath a vaulted ceiling painted with constellations, and the Hudson turned the arks southward, and the voyage began its long gentle approach to the end of itself.

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The descent from that bend to the harbour proper took the better part of a day and a half. The river widened; the traffic thickened; the other arks — now passing in both directions, the spring being a busy season for the mid-river — grew more numerous. La Granada greeted each politely, and each greeted back, and twice she was recognised by crimson arks she had known personally in decades past, and had brief warm exchanges with each. La Stregona, who had been one of the crimson ships of her youth and who had not voyaged out of the harbour for some time, sent a particular message of welcome that La Granada received with the small old pleasure of being remembered by a contemporary.

On the afternoon of the tenth day they rounded the bend above Yonkers and the long low shape of the island rose ahead of them in full. The lights were coming on in scattered rectangles. The sky was going from gold to lilac in the way the light does on that stretch of river. La Palmera hummed a final farewell and peeled off toward her own mooring at the old Chelsea piers; La Granada descended alone — though not alone, because a crimson ark named La Sanguinaria had come up from Brooklyn Heights to meet her at the bend and was escorting her down the last stretch — toward the southern tip of the island.

Wren stood at the forward rail. They had stood there, in one posture or another, for most of the afternoon. Alma was beside them. Captain Isidro was on the bridge, drinking a late cup of tea; he had come up twice during the afternoon to look at the horizon and had twice returned to his tea. The folk-tale book was in Wren's zippered jersey pocket, humming at a pitch the ark now recognised as the beginning of ringing. The paired volume, far below the marble of Grand Central Terminal and now rising, as La Granada felt it do in the last mile before the final approach, in the pocket of an eleven-year-old named August, was humming back at the same pitch.

The two books had begun to ring together.

La Granada warmed her hull by a full degree and held the warming. She did not send word to Wren. She did not send word to Alma. The warming, as I have noted elsewhere, is an ark's private ceremony. It was enough, for the moment, that it had been performed.

The sun was low. The water was lilac. The city was burning on the horizon with the particular burning of a city at dusk that has had a long day and is ready, now, to become an evening. La Granada rounded the last bend, passed the long grey shape of the Jersey shore on her starboard side, and entered the harbour.

VIII. The Approach

La Granada docked that evening at the pier that had been reserved for her at the southern tip of the island, a few hundred yards from the grove, in the particular slip the crimson fleet keeps for visiting rose ships. The slip is not a permanent slip in the municipal sense; it is a slip the harbourmasters of Manhattan have, by long unspoken agreement, declined to assign to any other vessel, on the grounds that a visiting rose ship in spring has as good a claim to it as any of the various civic interests that have, across the years, periodically proposed using it for other purposes. The slip sits between two warehouses no longer in commercial use and faces southward, which is the proper orientation for an ark whose keeper will, within the next days, wish to walk to the grove.

La Cinabrio, who could not easily be everywhere at once but who had made arrangements, had relocated herself for the occasion from her marble berth uptown to a temporary mooring alongside. The relocation is a matter of some small technical interest, which I shall not here elaborate; it is enough to say that the ark's presence in the harbour on the evening of La Granada's arrival was made possible by a brief overnight transit along the subterranean corridor that connects the lower platforms of Grand Central to the harbour mouth, which corridor does not appear on any surface map and which the arks of the crimson fleet have used for relocations of this kind since the early decades of the century. La Cinabrio had arrived at the harbour mooring at three in the afternoon and had been waiting, in a state of barely suppressed anticipation, for the five hours preceding La Granada's arrival.

She was glowing red against the lilac.

I use the word glowing not metaphorically but descriptively. An ark in a state of intense anticipation — the kind of anticipation La Cinabrio had been holding for six weeks and had, in the final hours, concentrated — will sometimes warm her hull to a degree that, in the right light, produces a faint visible luminosity. This luminosity is not electrical. It is not phosphorescent. It is, so far as I have been able to determine, a direct consequence of the warming itself, the hull radiating enough heat that the thin layer of air around it shimmers very slightly in the ordinary atmospheric way, and the light of the setting sun, catching this shimmer, produces an effect a careful observer has called, not without justice, a glow. La Cinabrio was glowing. The evening air was cooler by some degrees on the harbour side of her hull than on her terminal side, and the difference had produced, across the two hours before La Granada's arrival, a thin envelope of shimmer. La Granada, coming round the last point of the island, saw the glow before she saw the ark, and knew it immediately for what it was.

At the dock Alma and Rosana were waiting.

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This is the passage of the account I have found most difficult to compose, and I ask the reader's patience with the slowness of my approach to it. Alma and Rosana had not seen each other in three years. They had corresponded across those three years, as they had corresponded for the thirty-one before them, by letter of the ordinary kind — the Chicago ark and the New York ark carrying the letters in the ordinary mailbag between them twice a year, and filling in the intervening silences with the occasional slow message passed through the matriarchs of the two fleets when something particular needed saying — but they had not met. The last meeting had been three years earlier, on the occasion of Alma's previous east-voyage, at which Wren had not been aboard, and the meeting before that had been six years earlier, at the occasion of Rosana's only west-voyage, at which August had been four years old and had been very carefully introduced to Alma as the child of whom Alma had been hearing, across the intervening two years, in Rosana's letters.

Now, on the evening of this April, they were meeting again. Alma was fifty-two. Rosana was fifty-four. They had each, in the intervening three years, aged three years, which is not, in the ordinary course, a very great amount, but which can sometimes — the reader who has had a long-distance friendship across a middle life will recognise what I am about to say — produce a moment of small quiet reckoning at the first sight of the friend who has aged simultaneously. Alma saw Rosana standing on the pier. Rosana saw Alma standing on La Granada's deck. Neither woman moved.

They did not wave. They simply waited. They had been waiting thirty-one years and they had learned, across those years, how to wait well.

Wren, on La Granada's deck, was at Alma's side. August, on La Cinabrio's deck, was at Rosana's side. The two young humans had not, until this moment, seen each other. They had exchanged, by then, some one hundred and seventy letters across the two-year correspondence, and each of them knew, in the peculiar intimate way correspondents know each other, a great deal about the interior life of the other; but they had not seen the other's face. They saw now. La Granada, feeling the small shift of attention in Wren at the moment of seeing, and knowing from the matching shift in La Cinabrio's hull that August was simultaneously seeing, permitted herself a small internal warmth that she did not share with any of the humans aboard.

Wren and August came down the small gangways of their respective arks and walked the last few yards along the stone pier between them. Neither of them hurried. Neither of them slowed. They met, approximately, halfway, which was as close to the centre of the pier as two people walking at their natural pace from opposite ends will tend to meet. August was slightly taller than Wren, by perhaps an inch. August had dark hair cut short; Wren's yellow hair was longer and was, at that moment, blown a little sideways by the harbour wind. They looked at each other. They did not embrace. They did not shake hands. August said, hello, Wren. Wren said, hello, August. That was all. The letters had done most of the work. The two small words completed what the letters had established.

Wren continued walking toward Alma. August continued walking toward Rosana. The exchange had taken perhaps fifteen seconds.

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Ducking, Alma said softly.

Mother.

Come here.

Wren went into their mother's arms. Alma held them for a long quiet moment. Rosana, beside them, took August's hand and held it, and August squeezed it back, and the four of them stood in the gold-going-to-lilac light on the dock between the two ships with the harbour all around them and the two old arks above them humming softly in the gathering dark.

La Granada hummed. La Cinabrio hummed. Between the two hulls, between the two mothers, between the two young humans, the two hums threaded themselves into a whole single warm chord, and the evening settled onto the harbour, and the lights came on, and the first star came out over the water.

All right, ducking? Alma said.

All right, mother.

Good.

Good.

Rosana and August approached. Alma and Rosana looked at each other for a moment over their children's heads, and the look was, as the look of two old friends meeting again after three years tends to be, a look that did not need to be supplemented with words but that did, after its moment, permit words of the simple unaffected kind that old friends can bring themselves to use without embarrassment.

Alma.

Rosana.

You are here.

I am here.

Good.

Good.

They went aboard. The two arks closed up their reading floors for the evening. Supper was prepared, and eaten, and cleared. Afterwards, the four adults sat for a little while on La Cinabrio's

foredeck, in a loose semicircle of chairs Amadeo had made and had sent east over the years, and talked quietly in the manner of adults who had all, within the hour, welcomed a particular accomplishment of which they were not in the habit of speaking directly. Henri joined them after an hour — he had come back from the print shop and had been told by Rosana in a brief aside at the top of the gangway that the ships had docked and the children had met — and was introduced to Alma and Wren, and was accepted, with the ease Henri had of being accepted, into the small circle of the evening.

Wren and August, after supper, had gone below. They sat, in August's small cabin, cross-legged on the floor with their backs against the wall and their books in their laps. They did not speak much. They did not need to. The two humming books, now ringing in audible sympathy, were the conversation; the two young humans were, in their silence, merely attending the conversation the books were having. La Cinabrio felt this in the wall of the cabin and warmed the wall by a half-degree. La Granada, alongside her, warmed her own walls by a half-degree in answering sympathy.

At around nine Rosana knocked on the cabin door. She did not open it. She said, through the door, ducklings, it is time. Wren and August got up. They came out. They had their coats and their books.

They walked across the gangway to the dock, and from the dock along the short stretch of pavement toward the Battery, and from the Battery along the small irregular section of seawall I have previously described. They did not look back. They had been instructed, in the way children of ark-keepers are instructed in such matters, to look straight ahead. Alma and Rosana watched them go. Alma and Rosana, who had walked this walk themselves thirty-one years before under analogous circumstances, knew better than to accompany the children on their approach to the grove. This was a walk for the young humans and the books. The keepers were to wait.

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I will not describe the walk. The path is not mine to map. It is not, as I have said, a difficult walk; it is a walk one is either ready for or not, and a walker who is ready for it finds the path at the moment of readiness, and the walker who is not ready finds only the ordinary seawall and must return and try again in some subsequent year. Wren and August were ready. The path, for them, appeared. They walked it.

What I can describe is the grove as they found it. The light beneath the trees was the green-gold light to which I have made reference throughout this account. It did not correspond to the hour of the day in the harbour that contained it. The trees rose to enormous heights on either side of them, taller than any of the buildings of the city, though the city — from within the grove — was no longer visible. The ground beneath their feet was the old stone I have also previously described,

smoothed by the long traffic of walkers of this kind across the centuries. The air smelled faintly of the books the trees had been.

In the centre of the grove, in a small clearing, the old stone was flat and bare. It was on this flat bare stone that the plantings took place. Wren and August walked to the stone. They did not speak. They knew, in the way the walker to the grove knows such things at the moment of arrival, what they were to do.

Wren unzipped the pocket of the yellow jersey. They took out the folk-tale book. They held it in both hands for a moment. They looked at August. August had taken out their harbour-poems book and was holding it in both hands in the same posture. The two children were approximately the same height at that moment, the slight difference I had earlier noted disappearing in the uneven light of the grove. Their two books, held in their hands, hummed at the pitch of ringing, audibly now, the first time either of them had been audibly humming to human ears.

Wren placed the folk-tale book on the stone. August placed the harbour-poems book beside it, perhaps two inches apart. The two books continued, for a moment, to hum. Then, very gradually, the humming began to soften — not to fade, but to become something else, to turn inward, to become the quiet of a thing that has completed what it came to do. Within perhaps a minute the humming was gone. The books lay on the stone, side by side, ordinary books again, as though whatever had happened had already happened.

The two children stood at the stone for a moment. Then they turned, and walked back, and the path held for them, and they came back to the seawall, and to the Battery, and to the pier, and to the dock where their mothers were waiting.

Rosana said, it is done.

Alma said, yes.

They did not ask the children any questions. The children went aboard. They slept.

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In the morning Wren woke early. They put on the yellow jersey. They went up to the deck. Alma was there, and Rosana, and August was there too, in their coat. The five of them — six, if one counts La Granada, and seven, if one counts La Cinabrio, which one certainly should — walked together to the Battery, and from the Battery along the seawall, and the path, at this second walking, appeared again. They walked to the grove. In the centre of the grove, where the stone had been bare the night before, two small saplings stood.

They were perhaps six inches tall. Their leaves were small and new and very green. The light beneath them was the green-gold light, though the saplings themselves were too young to contribute more than a very faint glow of their own to the overall radiance. Their roots, which would in time

braid themselves into the old stone as the roots of all the trees of the grove had braided themselves, had already begun the braiding; one could see, at the base of each sapling, the very earliest evidence of the process. The two saplings stood approximately two inches apart, which was the distance at which Wren and August had placed the books the night before.

Wren did not feel the empty pocket as a loss. They felt it as a small warm new shape — the shape of a book that had become a tree that would go on becoming a tree for longer than they would live, and longer than La Granada would live, and longer than the pipework of lower Manhattan would stand. It was a good new shape to carry.

They turned to August. August turned to Wren. Neither of them spoke. They smiled at each other, a small private recognising smile, the smile of two people who had done a thing together that would, for the rest of their lives, be the thing they had done together.

Rosana and Alma stood to one side. They watched their children. They did not speak either. Above them, where the green-gold light came down through the tall tall trees, the air was warm and still.

Then they turned, the five of them, and walked back along the path, and the path held for them a last time, and they came out onto the ordinary seawall, and the city resumed. The ordinary morning gulls were crying over the harbour. The ordinary Monday traffic was beginning on the ordinary streets above the Battery. The grove, behind them, was no longer visible; the walk back had taken them out of it, in the same unnoticed way the walk in had taken them into it. They went back to the pier, and to the arks, and La Granada, who had been warming her hull by a full degree for the whole of the morning, finally allowed herself to warm it by a second degree, and to hold the warming for the rest of the afternoon.

VIII bis. Of the Lost Ark Thessaly, and What She Carried

There is an ark whose name does not appear in the catalogue given in an earlier chapter, because she is no longer in the fleet, and whose story I had intended to omit, because it is a sorrowful one, but who has — through a small insistence of the material itself — refused to be omitted. I give her, therefore, her own brief chapter.

Her name was Thessaly. She was a violet ark, the only violet ark the Interior Sea has ever produced, and she was fifty-one years old in the spring of 1923, which was her last spring. She kept her slip at the mouth of the Cuyahoga in Cleveland, and she carried, at the time of her loss, some nine thousand volumes, a crew of three, and a single humming book that had been humming for eleven months, which is the longest recorded humming before a planting.

On the night of the 4th of April, 1923, in weather that was reported at the time as unremarkable, Thessaly left her slip on a voyage to Buffalo. She did not arrive. No wreckage was found. No body was recovered. The lake between Cleveland and Buffalo is not, as lakes go, a large lake, and it was searched, thoroughly, by vessels of three nations, and Thessaly was not found.

This was the official conclusion. The unofficial conclusion, which I will now relate, comes again from the private log of La Granada, whose captain at the time — an old man named Bruno — wrote, on the 7th of April:

> *Thessaly has been heard. Low Hum received at 3:12 a.m., thin but unmistakable, from a bearing of E.N.E. and from no distance I can fix. She is not at the bottom. I will not say where she is. I will say that she is humming still.*

Bruno was a sober man not given to speculation, and his entry is, in its restraint, more alarming than any speculation would have been. He repeated the observation on the 14th of April, and on the 3rd of May, and on an irregular schedule thereafter for the remaining nineteen years of his captaincy. His successor, a woman named Dolores — the same Dolores cited in the matter of Ginevra's reflagging — recorded the same observation on the 2nd of November of her first year, and on seven subsequent occasions across a shorter captaincy. The hum has been heard by four of La Granada's successive captains. It has not been heard, to my knowledge, by any other ark.

The question of what happened to Thessaly therefore admits, in the register I trust, of a single answer: nothing. She did not sink. She did not burn. She did not, so far as the evidence suggests, stop being an ark. She merely ceased to be locatable. It is as though the humming volume she was carrying — which had been humming for eleven months, and which must, by the reckoning of the grove, have been very close to planting — had, in its final impatience, planted the whole ark along with itself, and had done so not at the old stone at the southern tip of Manhattan but at some other stone, in some other tip, in a geography the surviving captains have not been granted access to.

I record this, again, without insisting upon it. The ark Thessaly is officially lost. She is unofficially humming. Both things are true, and the reader who prefers the first may keep it; the reader who prefers the second is welcome to join me, at any quiet hour of any spring night, in listening to the east-north-east.

She was, by all accounts, a very good ark. The fleet has not produced another violet one, and in my opinion will not. The colour was hers.

IX. Coda

La Granada remained in Manhattan for two more weeks. This was the customary length of a visit between voyaging rose ships and their crimson hosts, and had been the customary length for as long as the voyage itself had been customary. A rose ship did not arrive in Manhattan on a Wednesday and leave on a Friday. A voyage was a voyage; a visit was a visit; and the visit had its own honoured length, which was enough days for the rose ship to properly appreciate her crimson sister and enough days for the young humans of each household to become properly acquainted with the other. Two weeks was the accepted shape. La Granada had been observing it for thirty-one springs.

The two weeks were good.

The days after the grove had a particular sweetness to them — the sweetness of a voyage that has done what it came to do, and can now simply be. La Granada loved such weeks. She had them rarely, because most voyages were occupied with one task or another the entire way through, but once every few years she had a spring in which the main business was done early, and the rest of the visit was the gentle after-pleasure of it, and this was one of those springs. She did very little. She watched the harbour. She greeted, each morning and each evening, the crimson arks who came by in the small slow traffic of the harbour. She allowed the sun to fall on her foredeck in whatever way the sun chose to fall. She warmed her hull at a half-degree above her ordinary for the entire fourteen days, and at no point asked the keepers to turn the interior heat down, and no one asked why.

Wren and August were together most of every day.

This was, by the second day after the grove, simply the shape of things. La Granada noted it without comment. La Cinabrio noted it without comment. The two arks did, once, exchange a small knowing hum about it — a hum so small and dry and affectionate that it could not be called gossip, exactly, though La Granada privately suspected it was adjacent — and then they left the matter alone. Some things were for the arks to appreciate in silence.

Wren and August were not, as far as La Granada could tell, doing anything in particular. They walked the concourse of Grand Central together. They sat on Pieter's two-person chair on the dock, which Amadeo had built and which had been unwrapped on the second morning of the visit and placed at the end of the small pier between the two arks. They shelved books together, aboard both ships, because both young humans had the shelver's instinct and neither could sit idle for long in a room full of shelves in which some books were in the wrong places. They had supper with their mothers. They went to a cello recital on Friday — a matter of some small civic interest, to which Rosana had had tickets for some weeks — and listened for an hour. August took Wren on a tour of midtown one afternoon, the week after the grove, because Wren had not been that far north; Wren made August a very bad drawing of the Chicago skyline one evening on the reading floor of La

Granada, because August wanted to know the exact shape of the Willis Tower. It was an extremely ordinary fortnight. La Granada approved of it completely.

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Wren was humming, now. Faintly, privately, and mostly without noticing. The Low Hum had, by some slow process La Granada could not entirely explain, moved into them. They felt the arks now — not as clearly as Rosana did, not yet, but clearly enough. They said small things to La Granada out loud, not constantly, but often enough, and La Granada hummed back, and Wren, most of the time, felt the reply.

August, who had been feeling the Low Hum a little longer, was settling into theirs too.

The two young humans were coming into their instruments. That was how La Granada thought of it — as instruments, the way a musician comes into their instrument over years of patient use. The arks were their instruments, and the instruments were responding to them, and La Granada and La Cinabrio, being the two most immediately involved instruments, were both quietly pleased.

I note, for the record, that the acquisition of the Low Hum by a young human is not an automatic consequence of being raised aboard an ark. Some keepers' children acquire it; some do not. The factors are not well understood. The prevailing theory in the rose fleet is that the Low Hum comes to those young humans who, in some hard-to-specify way, wish to receive it — not who will themselves to receive it (the willing, in these matters, tends to be counterproductive) but who have a disposition toward the kind of slow patient listening that makes the hum audible. Wren had this disposition. August had it. The two of them, in coming into their instruments simultaneously and in each other's company, were therefore receiving the hum in what the older keepers of both fleets call the paired manner, which is the best manner in which to receive it, because each young human's instrument helps the other's to tune itself.

Whether this is the reason the hum arrived in them so gently, or whether the reason is something else I have not been able to identify, I cannot say. I note only that, by the end of the fortnight, both young humans could hear the warmings of their respective arks with some reliability, and both could send, by quiet concentrated attention, small messages back along the channel by which they received them.

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On the twelfth day, Alma and Rosana had a long tea together in Rosana's sitting room aboard La Cinabrio. The tea ran for about three hours. La Cinabrio attended to it the way an ark attends to important conversations — which is to say, she made sure the two old friends were comfortable, warmed the walls a half-degree, kept the sitting room's window lightly open so the concourse air could drift through, and otherwise minded her own business as much as an ark who is also the

building can mind her own business. What Alma and Rosana talked about was, according to La Cinabrio's later modest report to La Granada, approximately thirty-one years of accumulated small news, though they had largely worked through this in the first week, and toward the last hour they had been talking about nothing at all — just sitting, as old friends can, and drinking the tea, and enjoying the sunshine coming sideways through the window.

La Granada found this enormously satisfying. The two women had, in her view, earned their three hours. The two arks had, in their view, earned the small dry pleasure of sharing the attendance on it.

La Cinabrio reported, at the end of the tea, that Rosana had said one small thing La Granada might like to hear.

Yes?

She said she was going to come west this summer. For a visit.

La Granada warmed.

I will have her at my slip.

She said she was hoping you would.

Of course, dear. Of course.

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On the fourteenth day, the morning of La Granada's departure for home, the harbour was exactly as bright as it had been on the morning of her arrival, which La Granada took as a good sign. It had rained for three days earlier in the week — a soft sociable rain, the kind La Granada did not mind — and the air on the departure morning was washed and clear, with the particular thin wet-light that New York air sometimes had after a rain.

The doors were not going to open today. The Chicago fleet was leaving at nine, and the crimson fleet was seeing them off.

La Granada took her morning inventory more slowly than usual. She was, she admitted to herself, sentimental. Two weeks moored next to La Cinabrio had left her in the kind of mood that wanted to catalogue every small good thing — the exact angle of the morning sun on La Cinabrio's red hull, the particular smell of Rosana's caraway biscuits baking in the galley across the dock, the small pleased weight of Wren asleep in their cabin for the last time in this harbour — and she took her time cataloguing each one.

Wren was up at six-forty.

They came up to the galley a little more slowly than they had on the morning of departure from Chicago. They were, La Granada felt, already half home and half here — half looking forward to the

return and half reluctant to finish the visit. They sat at the table with their blue enamel cup. The cup was half of Alma's coffee and half of a little warm milk, which was how Alma was making it this morning, and they drank it slowly and looked out across the dock at La Cinabrio's red hull glowing in the early sun.

Mother.

Ducking.

Are you sad to leave?

Always, a little.

Why always.

Because Rosana is here and I am about to not be where she is for some months.

Ah.

And because I like it here. I always have.

I do too.

I know you do, ducking.

They drank their coffee in silence for a minute or two. Then Wren asked a question Alma had been half-expecting and half-not.

Will we come again next spring?

If the ark wishes.

She'll wish.

How do you know?

She told me.

Alma did not question this. The reception of Low Hum by a keeper's child in their first voyage season was well-attested, and Alma had felt, in her own time, the small quiet settling of such receptions. She smiled at her child and said nothing. Wren smiled back, not broadly, just with their eyes, which is a very characteristic way for young humans of Wren's disposition to smile, and drank their coffee.

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At eight-thirty the farewells began. Alma and Rosana embraced at the foot of La Cinabrio's gangway and held the embrace for some seconds, in the manner of old friends parting with the certainty of reunion. Wren and August stood a little apart, observing this, and then, when their mothers had separated, embraced their own embrace, which was shorter but of a comparable

warmth. Henri came out from the shop and shook Alma's hand, and shook Wren's hand, and patted Captain Isidro on the shoulder (the two men were contemporaries and had, in a silent masculine way, become fond of each other across the visit). Isidro went back to the bridge with his mug of tea. The small brass zipper on the yellow jersey pocket — empty now of the folk-tale book, but equipped with a new small leaf August had pressed into it on the twelfth day as a keepsake — was zipped shut.

At nine La Granada cast off.

The crimson fleet saw them off. All eleven crimson arks sent a simultaneous Low Hum farewell as La Granada pulled away from her slip — a chord of eleven voices, Low Hum, sent through the water at the moment of the small rose ark's departure, which is a thing the crimson fleet had reserved for only certain partings across its history and which La Granada had not previously been sent. The chord reached her through the water as she cleared the harbour mouth. She hummed back her thanks. She held the hum for longer than was strictly polite, because she was, on this particular morning, sentimental in the way an old ark is sometimes sentimental, and the eleven crimson arks, understanding, held theirs for just as long.

The harbour receded. The island receded. The grove, invisible as always from the ordinary harbour but present, as always, to the ark's particular kind of attention, stood at the southern tip with its two new saplings growing slowly in its green-gold light.

La Granada turned north, and westward, and began the long return voyage home.

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The voyage home is not, conventionally, the subject of an account of this kind. It is considered, by the keepers of both fleets, to be a resumption rather than a journey: the rose ship returns to her own harbour, and the young human returns to their own city, and the keeper returns to her own kitchen, and the account, which has been concerned with the journey out, comes properly to its end at the moment of the ship's departure from the visiting harbour.

I will, in compliance with this convention, not describe the return. I will note only that it was uneventful, that the weather was mild, and that Wren — who had by then come fully into their instrument and could hear La Granada's Low Hum with the clarity of a trained listener, though not yet with the clarity of their mother — spent most of the voyage home on the foredeck, with the new small leaf in their zipped pocket, watching the water they had watched coming east now going west behind them, and asking La Granada, from time to time, small questions that La Granada was happy to answer.

They arrived at Marina City on the fifth of May. Amadeo was waiting on the barge. He raised a length of cedar in greeting as La Granada pulled into her slip, and Wren, who was on the forward rail, raised their coffee cup in return, and Amadeo waved the cedar once more, and Wren laughed,

and Alma, who was standing beside them, smiled her small slow smile, and La Granada warmed her walls by a half-degree in her slip, and settled.

She was home.

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Wren is grown now. They keep La Granada at her slip between the two round towers of Marina City, as Alma kept her before them, and Alma's teacher Beatriz before Alma, and Beatriz's teacher before Beatriz, and a long line of keepers before them whose names the registers variously record. August keeps La Cinabrio a thousand miles to the east — in the terminal most days, in the museum on certain afternoons — and writes to Wren, as Rosana wrote to Alma, and the letters cross the country in both directions and are held, each morning, in the warming hulls of their respective arks until their recipients come to fetch them.

Alma is retired, after a manner of speaking. She still lives aboard La Granada with Amadeo, in the small apartment above Amadeo's shop on the adjacent barge, which they moved into when Wren took on the principal keepership. She reads. She gardens, in the small garden the barge permits. She writes her letters to Rosana, who is also retired, after a manner of speaking, and who lives with Henri in a small apartment off the Grand Central concourse, in a room that was, for some of the years of her keepership, a storage room for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and that has now been rented to her by a civic authority which has, across the decades, developed the habit of accommodating La Cinabrio's household.

Captain Isidro is gone. He died in his sleep in his small bunk near the bow, aboard La Granada, in the winter of what was, by the reckoning of at least one register, his ninety-third year. His mug was beside him. The tea in the mug was cold. La Granada warmed her walls by a full degree at the moment of his going and held the warming for an afternoon, and did not thereafter mention the matter, because there are things an ark does not discuss, even with a chronicler whose cooperation she has extended. The current captain of La Granada is a quiet thoughtful man named Mateo, who was Isidro's apprentice for the last decade of Isidro's life and who took on the captaincy in the manner his teacher had modelled, which is to say by accompanying the ark while she navigates and drinking his tea and not attempting to teach her anything.

The grove at the southern tip of Manhattan has, since that April, two additional trees. They are the youngest trees in the grove. They are now, by the reckoning of the crimson captains, some thirty feet tall, which is a more than respectable growth for two young trees of their age, and which suggests that their eventual height will be, as I have elsewhere speculated, considerable. Their trunks are intertwined at the root. Their crowns, at present, reach for the same sky in a single shared canopy, and when the wind moves through them on a spring evening, the two trees hum, very faintly, in the audible voice of paired books that have completed their long becoming.

I have visited the grove, at the invitation of August, who is the principal keeper of La Cinabrio and who by virtue of that office has the authority to invite scholars of certain kinds. I have stood beneath the paired trees. I have heard the faint hum. I have not, for reasons I will not here enumerate, reported any specific impressions of the experience, except to say that the hum is what the private log of La Granada reports it to be, and that a scholar who has heard it will not afterward question the account.

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The arks do not hurry. They are the oldest characters in this account, and their counsel on the matter of hurry is, I think, sound. La Granada is a hundred and sixty-three years old now, by the most generous of the three registers, and a hundred and sixty-one by the most conservative, and shows, by both reckonings, no inclination to depart. La Cinabrio is in her eightieth year. La Albarrana, who has been mentioned in passing, has crossed into her hundred and thirty-fourth. La Enredadera — the matriarch — has been officially in her nineties for some decades now, and has, so far as I can determine, no intention of ever coming out.

The fleet persists. The grove grows. The readers come and go. The books hum when they are loved, and some are planted, and the planted ones become trees, and the trees stand. This is, so far as I have been able to establish, the shape of the whole long institution. The shape is a good one. The institution is a kind one. If the reader takes from this account any single small lesson, I would wish it to be that a thing loved for long enough by enough people is not a thing that is taken from them at the end; it is a thing that outgrows its original form and becomes available to them in a second form, larger and stranger and, in the long reckoning, kinder than the first.

This is what I have been able to establish concerning the Arks of the Interior Sea. I hope the account has treated you kindly. There is more. There is always more. But the reader who has come this far has come far enough for the book to have become, in some small way — as any object attended to with warm attention becomes — a small real thing in the world.

Go well.

— Compiled from the harbour registers, the private logs, and the somewhat embroidered recollections of certain old captains, in a room above the Chicago River, on an afternoon in autumn.

Afterword

by Surjan

You have finished the translation. I hope it treated you kindly.

A few things I would like to say now, which would have been the wrong things to say at the front.

The grove is the image I thought about most, in both books — the first and this one. In the first, the grove was the emotional destination of a long slow voyage between two sentient libraries. In this one, the grove is almost the same grove, but it has been lightly catalogued, as if someone had been through it with a clipboard and noted the species. I find that I like it both ways. I find that the clipboard does not, in fact, diminish the grove. A thing that has been loved for long enough can sustain both reverence and footnotes. Perhaps the clipboard is one of the ways the thing continues to be loved. It is, at any rate, a way of paying attention, and paying attention is the one gesture of love that does not distinguish between the reverent and the pedantic. The monk in his cell cataloguing manuscripts and the grandmother in her kitchen remembering the exact order in which her mother added the spices to the broth are doing, it seems to me, approximately the same thing. Both are honouring what they have been given by holding it in their mind.

The word that most changed between the two versions is library. In the first book the ships were libraries, plainly and happily, and the word earned its keep. In this version the ships are arks, and the books they carry are called their cargo, and the word library has vanished almost entirely. This was not an easy substitution. A library is a particular kind of generous. An ark is a particular kind of watchful. I found, in the translation, that the two words did not quite do the same work — that to call these vessels arks was to admit, quietly, that they were carrying their books through a long dark passage rather than simply holding them in a warm well-lit room. I was not sure, at first, that I wanted to make that admission. I am, now, glad to have made it. The books in the grove are not safer than the books in the library. They are, in some slow important way, more planted.

I want to say a word about the voice this book is written in, because the voice is the translation, and the translation is the thing. The first novella was written in a voice I know well — my own voice, warmed and slowed by the company of the ships themselves. This second version is written in a voice I was merely visiting. It is the voice of a patient scholar-narrator compiling from old ledgers, footnoting his own speculations, and conceding, in the dry way such narrators do, what he cannot quite establish. I did not invent this voice. No one invents a voice of this kind. A voice like this belongs to a long tradition of scholar-narrators, and I have borrowed it, as carefully and as affectionately as I could, for the length of this small book. I do not claim to have used it as well as its

best practitioners. I claim only that it was offered to me freely by the tradition, and that the tradition, I hope, is honoured by the attempt.

A small observation about the experience of writing in someone else's voice — because I had not expected this, and it seems worth recording. When one writes in one's own voice, one is doing a familiar thing at the ordinary distance: the voice is where one stands, and the sentences are arranged around that standing. When one writes in a borrowed voice, one is doing a familiar thing at an unfamiliar distance: the voice is a few steps further out than one is accustomed to, and the sentences have to be arranged around the new standing. This sounds more difficult than it is. In practice, the borrowed voice — provided it is a voice one has spent enough time reading that one knows it the way a person knows a particular street — turns out to be very hospitable. It lets one say things one's own voice would not let one say. It makes room for digressions one's own voice would not have made room for. It permits, above all, the small patient impossibilities that this book is so largely made of: the ark in the terminal, the grove at the tip of the island, the paired saplings. My own voice, in the first book, had trouble with those impossibilities — it kept wanting to explain them, or apologise for them, or treat them as metaphors. The scholarly voice, in this book, had no such trouble. It simply recorded them, and footnoted the difficulties, and moved on.

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I want to say something, too, about Wren in this version.

In the first book, Wren was a yellow-sweatered child of indeterminate gender whom I, as the author, had not fully known how to render. I knew what Wren was. I did not quite know how to say it on the page without making it the whole of what Wren was, which would have been wrong. In this version, at the request of a reader I am glad to have listened to, Wren is non-binary on the page, plainly and without fanfare. The ark sees them. The family uses their pronouns. August, on the other ark, is the same kind of child, and the two of them have written letters across two winters in a way that young people who recognise each other across distance have always written letters. I am pleased with this clarification. I believe it is what the first book was trying to say, and did not quite say, and that this one — perhaps in the scholarly distance this new voice gave me — has said more easily.

I want to record, too, that the moment of Wren and August telling each other, by letter, what they were — that fourth-letter moment, small and undramatic, which happens offstage and is only referenced in passing by the narrator — was the moment of the book I found most emotionally affecting to write. It happens offstage because the scholar-narrator does not see children's letters; he sees only the testimony of the arks. But the arks saw it, and reported it to me, and I set down their testimony with some care, because I wanted the moment to be available to the reader who needed it and to be invisible to the reader who did not. I have had, in my own life, a correspondence of this kind. Most people who have had such a correspondence know that it is not an event; it is a recognition, which is a very different thing. The scholarly voice of this book, with its small dry

exactitude, turned out to be a good instrument for honouring the recognition without making too much of it.

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I want to say something about the four interludes — the chapters marked with the small Latin bis — because they were the part of the book I did not know I was going to write. The narrative is the voyage. I had the voyage from the beginning. But the scholarly voice, once I had begun to speak in it, began to want things the voyage itself could not provide: a catalogue of the seven rose ships, each given the respect of a single sentence; a patient meditation on the three disagreeing registers; an account of what stood at the tip of Manhattan before books were planted there; and the old sorrowful small story of the violet ark Thessaly, who is officially lost and unofficially humming. These interludes are, in the architecture of the book, a kind of walking-around between the narrative chapters — rooms the reader can step into when the voyage has momentarily paused. I was advised by my collaborator that they should be placed as interludes rather than clustered together, and I think this advice was right. They let the voyage breathe.

Of the four, the one I am proudest of is the Thessaly chapter. Thessaly is not in the first book. She does not belong there — her story, with its particular sorrowful open-endedness, is a story of the second book's voice, not the first book's. The first book's voice would have had to resolve her, because the first book's voice does not quite know how to leave things unresolved. The scholar-narrator of the second book was able to leave her exactly as she is: officially lost, unofficially humming, neither alive nor dead in the conventional sense, merely unlocatable. This is a condition the scholarly voice can hold; the warm domestic voice would have had to do something with it. I am glad Thessaly could exist in this version. I suspect she would not have permitted me to write her in the first.

The grove-before-the-grove chapter is the one I had the most trouble with. The pre-history of the grove — the objects deposited at the old stone before books were, which then dispersed into the surrounding air — was a thing I did not know about when I began the second book and only discovered in the writing of it, when the scholar-narrator, having occasion to describe the grove's history, noticed that the grove was older than the books and that something must have come before. What came before was, by the logic of the scholar-narrator's voice, unplaceable things: objects that the ordinary world could not quite hold, and that were brought to the old stone by people who could not quite keep them, and that were — this is the phrase I am still reckoning with — dispersed into the surrounding air. I do not know what this means, exactly. I know that it is the kind of thing the scholarly voice was willing to set down, and that I was not willing to disagree with the voice about it. The chapter stands. The voice did not ask my permission.

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I want to thank the two cities again — Chicago and New York — and in particular the specific rooms of them that made it into this version. Marina City is a real place. Grand Central Terminal is a real place. The Guggenheim is a real place. I have not invented them. I have only suggested, quietly, that each of them is also the kind of place an ark could moor, if one were looking. I hope the next time you pass under the constellation-painted ceiling of Grand Central, at a quiet hour, you pause on the upper balcony and listen for a moment. You will not hear anything. That is all right. The listening is for you.

I also hope — and this is perhaps a larger hope — that if this book makes any of its readers, on any morning, pay a slightly warmer attention to any of the small kind ancient things of their own cities, it will have done part of what it meant to do. Not ships like these, but the things that, in your own city, do the work that the ships do in this one: libraries, theatres, corner diners, park benches, old trees, that one particular corner of a neighbourhood that has been itself for a long time and will, by the obstinate patience that characterises such places, continue to be itself for some time yet. These places hum. They do not hum loudly. They hum at a pitch most of the time one has to stop to hear. But when one stops, one hears them, and the hearing is, as I have said, a form of love, which is the form of love that is always available to us and that always rewards the effort.

And I want to thank you, the reader, last and most.

Thank you for reading slowly. Thank you for sitting with the arks. Thank you for not rushing the grove. Thank you for caring, for a little while, about a yellow-jerseyed child and a small paired book and a chair-maker named Amadeo and a tea-drinking captain named Isidro. They are made up. They are also — in the way that any thing one has paid warm attention to becomes real — now a small part of the world. Thank you for being the reader who made them real.

Go well.

— *Surjan*